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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

May 1, 1895.

No. 862.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
93 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXVII.

RIATA ROB THE RANGE CHAMPION



A STORY OF THE

Racket at Run-Over Ranch.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

"FOLLOW MY LEADER!"

"I COULD give it up without the slightest pang, Sybill, but—"

"But what, Rob?"

"It will be the last chance to prove myself champion. One short week, and the 1st will be here! One little span of seven days, and then the boss will be bossed, the king uncrowned, the chief turned into the humblest of vassals!"

"And the roper roped for life!" laughed the fair rider. "Will you be so awfully sorry, Robert?"

"So sorry that I'd give a round thousand head of three-year-olds for the power of crowding those seven days into one brief hour, my love!"

OR

DETECTIVE KLAN'S KNOCK-OUT

FOR A SINGLE BREATH IT SEEMED AS THOUGH HORSE AND RIDER MUST GO
DOWN TO DEATH TOGETHER.

His sinewy brown fingers closed over her neatly-gloved hand, while their steeds kept pace as though closely yoked together. Their eyes met, but while his spoke only of ardent love, in her blue orbs dwelt a troubled light.

"You have seen, then—"

"A cloud upon the face which should be brightest of all, little lady. Does it come through anything I have said or done, Sybil?"

"Nor left undone, Rob," was the quick assurance. "Only—if this festival had never been spoken of at all!"

"Shall we play it hadn't, Sybil?"

"What do you mean, Rob?"

"That one word from your lips will end the festival, so far as I am concerned."

The maiden caught her breath, gazing keenly, almost curiously into his face for a few moments before speaking.

"You mean it, Robert? You would really throw away such a chance, simply because of a whim on my part?"

"Hardly a whim, Sybil; wish it was!" with a swiftly passing frown that lent his strong face an air of almost fierceness. "As for throwing it away—what is the chance? That of winning an empty title which I have already won and worn for two years."

"I know men who would give a year of their lives to win it, Rob!"

"One of them is your brother, Felix. If I could help him to the title, Sybil, I'd be more than happy. Yet, he'd take it as an insult rather than a favor—worse luck!"

Both faces were sober enough now as the lovers rode on over the prairie in the declining sun. Neither spoke, though each had ample food for thought.

For more than a year Sybil Parry and Robert Runnover had loved each other. For nearly half as long they had been betrothed, though, up to little more than one month before this record opens, only their own near relations shared with them this sweet secret.

Only the lovers seemed wholly pleased with this prospective alliance, and though no positive opposition had arisen as yet, at least one on each side had shown plainly enough that an open rupture would be more than welcome.

On one side stood Jason Runnover, Rob's father, grim and gaunt of visage, sharp and caustic of tongue; on the other, Felix Parry, Sybil's only brother, young, fiery, proud of the "blue blood" that coursed through his veins, pure and uncontaminated for centuries back. Prouder than ever, perhaps, since discovering that Rob's mother had come from across the line in Mexico.

"Not even a Spaniard, mind you!" as he more than once told Sybil in those earlier days. "A Mexican—half-Indian, if not entirely so!"

"Her son has proved himself the best man in all Texas," was her swift retort. "A pity some of our blue-bloods couldn't win as valuable a cross!"

But of late days fresh trouble had arisen, though up to the present time Sybil had managed to keep all positive knowledge from her betrothed, thanks to the bustle and hard work which attends the semi-annual round-up, though she sadly felt that the explosion must come sooner or later.

It was the custom on that range, as on many another, to spice hard work with sport and amusement, and when the semi-annual round-up was fairly over, with the cattle all gathered in, the increase marked and branded, and the different herds sent out to their respective ranges, one whole day and night was devoted to "play."

Naturally these sports partook of the life these hardy sons of the *riata* and saddle were won't to lead, year in and year out, with fitting prizes hung up for the victor in each variety of rein and lasso work, the richest reward of all consisting in a medal and the title of Range Champion, winning which entitled the lucky man to not only crown the "Queen of the Range," but to serve as her cavalier throughout the dance with which the festivities invariably wound up at night.

For the past two years, or four times in succession, Robert Runnover had won this proud distinction in open contest where each particular ranch had put forward its champion, though some had gone so far as to import a representative for the occasion, forgetting range loyalty in their longing to "down Riata Rob."

With each return of the celebration fresh rivalries would spring up until, the hard work of the round-up at an end, expectation would be at fever-heat. Nor was this occasion an exception.

"Felix would be first to crow at my missing it, but I wouldn't care for that if—Do you think he stands any show for carrying off the badge, Sybil?"

Those blue eyes flashed backward, but there was a strange light in them which Riata Rob vainly strove to interpret, and before he could utter the question that sprang to his lips, Sybil sent her steed forward with whip and spur, crying:

"Follow my leader!"

"To the gates of paradise!" cried Riata Rob, giving his willing horse free rein, all care and

gloominess vanishing from his face as he entered heartily into the spirit of the moment.

It was a childish game revived for their own amusement, and neither was too old to fully appreciate its delights.

"A kiss if I follow—two if you fail!" cried Rob, with a joyous laugh as that fair face turned backward for an instant.

But even as he spoke he felt there was something more in this sudden challenge than met the eye at first glance.

Sybil's face was pale, and her smile was plainly forced for the occasion. Was she trying to run away from her own thoughts, as well as from him?

"Steady, love!" he called out in clear warning as he rose in his stirrups to take a view of the ground ahead of their swiftly-flying horses. "Don't make any mistake about the taking-off place!"

"Follow my leader!" came floating back on the wind, and he could see that neatly-garbed figure settling itself in the saddle for the test which lay so near at hand.

He caught his breath sharply as he put a slight tension on his reins, proud of the woman before him, proud of her nerve, her skill, proud of the knowledge that not another of her sex on all that range would dare attempt the feat which she was so lightly facing.

Before them lay a deep *barranca* or canyon, its walls nearly perpendicular, its top flush with the plain, and invisible to the riders until almost upon it. At only one point had this winding crack ever been crossed by a leaping horse, so far as known; and only Sybil and Rob could boast of that record.

Time and again had the lovers made this leap, but with each new attempt the young rancher's heart would rise in his throat, to sink again only when his sweetheart had made a safe landing on the further side.

What if the frost-eaten rock should crumble and give way beneath the weight of her horse's hoofs as it gathered for the leap? What if—

Rising in the air, almost like the soaring of a bird, Sybil's good steed floated her across the chasm, and as he saw her alight in safety, Riata Rob laughed aloud and clearly shouted:

"Follow my leader!"

That steady strain slackened, though his skillful hand still felt his steed's mouth as he sped on, directly in the tracks of the gray horse, his eyes opening widely as he saw Sybil wheel abruptly, warning him back with hand and voice.

"Back—back, my love!" she cried, her voice harsh and unnatural with intense excitement.

"The rock is—back, for love of heaven!"

There was no time for more. Already the blood bay was at the edge of the *barranca*, rising for the leap which it had taken so often in safety. But now—

Shaken by the leap of the gray horse, the point of rock was falling, bit by bit, giving out an ugly sound as the fragments rattled down the wall of the *barranca*. A crack was widening behind the bay stallion, and strong though her nerves were, Sybil Parry closed her eyes and covered them with her trembling hands to shut out the awful tragedy which her own actions had precipitated.

Rob instantly divined his danger, and with a swift wrench he lifted his steed into the air, throwing it back upon its haunches for an instant before the reins, like bars of supple steel, fairly whirled the animal around as on a pivot. His heavy spurs buried themselves rowel deep. Hand, voice, heel, all encouraged the frightened stallion.

A fierce, scrambling leap—a clatter of falling stones—a mad tearing of crumbling earth—a fight for life that was almost heart-bursting—then rein and spurs seemed to fairly lift the good steed from out the jaws of death.

A blind, staggering plunge forward, then the bay stallion came to a pause, while its master laughed lightly as he called out across the chasm to his trembling love:

"An inch of a miss, Sybil! If a fellow was born to be hanged, he can't make a different ending, you know!"

"Don't—it's too far, Robert!" panted the maiden as she saw her reckless lover send his good steed away in a half-circle, plainly meaning to attempt a leap further up the *barranca*. "Don't—for my sake!"

But, if he heard, Rob did not heed. As he made that curve, he caught sight of two horsemen spurring swiftly toward them, and though he gave no sign, he recognized them both. More: he knew that their coming had urged Sybil to leap the *barranca* rather than have their company just then.

"You've got to make it, Prince!" he muttered. "Better death than let them see you balked!"

CHAPTER II.

THE SHADOW OF COMING EVENTS.

No living man could know better than Robert Runnover what long chances he was taking, just then; but, had the risk been doubled, he would not have hesitated.

He knew that the *barranca* had never been crossed by horse and rider, save at that one

point, where a projecting rock, covered with the gathering mold of ages, gave both a starting and a landing point on either side, bringing the leap down to a matter of nerve rather than of distance. But now, with one of those rocks gone, and with the earth cracked and crumbling about its former resting-place, crossing at that point was altogether out of the question.

He was familiar with the *barranca* from end to end, knowing that at all other points the distance was so great not one horse in a thousand could hope to cover it, even without that ugly depth added to the feat. And yet he did not hesitate for a single instant!

Life was very sweet to him now, when one short week would see fair Sybil Parry his wife; but even had he known failure must result—and under such circumstances failure meant certain death on those thick-lying rocks nearly a hundred feet below—he would have dared the leap.

With seeming recklessness, yet holding his good horse well in hand, and ready to lend it every aid that human skill could contrive, Riata Rob sent his mount forward at a quick gallop, paying no heed to the agitated cries of his sweetheart on the further bank.

Straight on until the brink was reached, then, rising with a catlike spring—hanging as it seemed in mid-air above that chasm—the noble animal floated over the *barranca*, striking with its feet close together on the very edge.

For a single breath it seemed as though both horse and rider must go down to death together. The earth crumbled beneath their weight. The shock broke off dry fragments. The dust rose around them. Then—with a light laugh and cheering cry, Rob fairly lifted his horse and sent it forward with a scrambling plunge!

"Oh! Rob, you should not—"

"What was it you said, little lady?" laughed the young rancher, his black eyes glowing vividly as they gazed into her tear-dimmed orbs. "Too far? Have you yet to learn that there is no obstacle too deep or too wide to keep me from the side of the woman I love? No, no, little lady! I'd come to you, even across the grave!"

Through all this those two horsemen had ridden rapidly forward, and, brief as had been the delay, it had given them time to come within hailing distance. And now, just in time to save Sybil the necessity of replying, a sharp, peremptory call made itself heard:

"Hold on, you!"

Riata Rob cast a keen glance across the *barranca*, speaking as if he had until then been in ignorance of their coming:

"Your brother, Sybil. How unfortunate we failed to observe them a little earlier. That is Owen Taylor with him?"

Sybil nodded assent, but said nothing, for the two horsemen drew rein on the opposite bank of the *barranca*, the taller of the twain calling out angrily:

"Are you bent on breaking your neck, Sybil Parry? And you, Rob Runnover, if you can't use better judgment as an escort, I'll thank you to keep away from my sister altogether!"

"Blame me, not Mr. Runnover, Felix," coldly replied Sybil, her face flushing a bit, her blue eyes beginning to glitter. "I led the way. He followed. You can do the same if you wish to join us, or if you have aught to say that will not keep until we get home."

"Have you a pair of wings to spare, Miss Parry?"

But Taylor smiled in vain, and his veiled compliment was worse than wasted. Sybil wheeled her horse and rode leisurely away, Riata keeping close to her side.

"Father shall know of this, my lady, and if he listens to me, it'll be one long while before you can play such a reckless prank again. I believe you did it simply to keep us from joining you," angrily called out Felix, riding along the opposite brink.

"You should have hailed us sooner, brother," with a smile. "I was in haste to reach home, and this was the shortest way. Why not follow, if you long for good company so ardently?"

Sweetly as she spoke, there was a thinly-veiled sneer underlying her words, and, with a scowl, Parry put spurs to his horse and dashed recklessly away.

Taylor followed his young host, though delaying long enough to tip his hat and make a deeply polite bow to the lady.

"I hate him! I both hate and fear that man!" exclaimed Sybil, as Taylor galloped off to join Felix.

"If he has dared to do or say aught to annoy you, Sybil, say a word and he'll never sin that way again!" flashed Rob, his face growing stern and his black eyes glittering vividly under his heavy brows.

"No—not that," was the hasty reply. "Only—when he's near me, I feel as though a venomous serpent was crawling—ugh!"

For several minutes the lovers rode on side by side in silence. Both seemed deeply thinking, and if their faces were taken as the criterion, neither mind was to be envied just then.

"You saw them coming, Sybil," at length observed Rob. "You took that leap simply to avoid them?"

"I saw them—yes," hesitatingly. "But if I could have known what was to follow—Robert, I suffered a thousand deaths in those few seconds while you were—"

"Don't think of it, little lady. I'll promise you never to try the leap again, unless you are the one to show me the way over," laughed the lover, with forced lightness. "But, this Taylor fellow: what brings him here just at this time?"

"I don't know. I only know that Felix claims him as a friend."

"Friend—Owen Taylor!" with a short, hard laugh. "He is nobody's friend but his own. He is a gambler, a blackleg, a scoundrel who would cut the throat of his own blind father if he had aught to gain by so doing!"

"You know him, then, Rob?" ejaculated Sybil, her eyes widely opened, her fair face full of strong surprise and curiosity. "I thought he and you were perfect strangers?"

"I've heard of him," was the moody reply, as those dark eyes lowered to evade her scrutiny. "Some day I'll tell you just what I've heard, but now—what is his excuse for lingering at Good Luck?"

"He talks some of buying out Widow Kate—the Gridiron Ranch, you know."

"Dealing faro must be mighty profitable business!" sneered Riata, a line of white showing beneath his jetty mustache. "Are you sure it isn't Good-Luck Ranch that fills his eye, Sybil?"

Their eyes met fully, and if Rob had a jealous fear, that steady gaze at once dispelled it. No other man could, for an instant stand as his rival in Sybil's heart!

"I wish he would go away. I have prayed for it times without number, for—you have noticed how changed Felix has been, of late?"

"Yes. Owen Taylor is a mighty dangerous friend and companion for a hot-blooded young man like Felix."

"He has taken to drinking so much! He seems changed in every way. He is cross to me, and—Robert?"

"Yes, little lady?"

"I believe it is all owing to that odious wretch, but—I fear there is wicked plotting going on against you, dear!"

"It will go no further than plotting, be sure, Sybil," with easy confidence. "Felix is too white at bottom to play an underhanded trick, and Taylor is too great a coward to let his hand be seen."

"I wish I might think so! But I believe you underestimate that man, dearest. He is ever smiling, ever cool and quiet and easy in seeming, but underneath all that lies a hand of steel and a heart of fire. Sometimes when I get to thinking, I try to pray that something may happen to prevent those sports altogether!"

"Hist, little woman!" a hand lightly covering her red lips as he flashed a glance of exaggerated dismay about him. "Never let our neighbors hear aught of that! They'd forget you were the dearest, sweetest, prettiest—"

"You are laughing at me, Robert Run-noyer!"

"I'm too badly frightened to even think of smiling, Sybil. But, seriously, if a man was to make such a wish known, the neighbors would fairly lynch him in their hot indignation. What! spoil the sports to which every eye of every man, woman, girl and boy has been turned with impatient longing these many long weeks?"

"Not mine. I dread the hour more and more the nearer it draws to hand. Only for you, Robert—"

"Say the word, give a single sign, Sybil, and I'll draw out for good and all," gravely, earnestly interposed the young rancher. "I have had my share of honors, such as they are, and I could stand aside without even a pang of envy as another took up the bauble. Shall I, dearest?"

There was no immediate reply. Sybil Parry rode on, her head bowed and her hands folded in her lap. Her face was very pale, and it was plainly the battle-ground for many conflicting emotions.

"I've thought of taking the step on my own account," softly added the rancher. "I would have resigned, long ago, if I could have felt sure Felix could carry off the prize. But—Well, I've heard some funny whispers about that Owen Taylor. They say he is going to try for the championship, though who is backing him bothers me."

"Curg, Dunklin, of the Tarantula Ranch—no less!" cried Sybil, with eyes flashing anew. "No, Rob, you shall not resign with my consent! You shall carry off the prize once more, despite all the jealous knaves in Texas! You shall—you must!"

"If you say so, little lady, be sure I'll do my level best," laughed Riata Rob, his own face glowing, his eyes very bright. "I could go through with it all easily enough, so far as I am personally concerned, but—shall I say it, little lady?"

"What is it, Robert?"

"It would cut me deep to see another woman crowned queen with you in the company, Sybil!"

She gave him a hand in reward, but Rob took the richer pay of a kiss. Why not?

After that they rode on in blissful silence for some little time, but Sybil had not told all, and her fears were too great for her to let this last opportunity pass by entirely unimproved.

"If it was only well over!" she sighed, with a half-impatient toss of her queenly head. "Only last night I heard brother talking with that odious Taylor. I listened, because I heard your name mentioned between them. And, though I could catch but very few words, I heard enough to be sure that some evil scheme was being hatched up against you for the coming sports. I heard—Ha!" she broke off abruptly, checking her horse to gaze ahead, where two horsemen were riding rapidly toward them.

"Felix and Taylor. They have rounded the barranca and are coming to join us," quietly uttered Riata Rob.

"Promise me you'll not be drawn into a quarrel, Robert!" hastily urged Sybil, a hand clasping his arm appealingly.

"I promise—so far, little lady," was the quiet response. "Your brother may use me for a door-mat if the fancy strikes him, and I'll never kick. But Owen Taylor—let him go mighty slow!"

CHAPTER III.

WIDOW KATE, OF THE "GRIDIRON."

"WHIST! will ye mind that, now?"

Mrs. Kate Malin halted her horse within its own length, though an instant before it had been covering ground in a fair gallop, and it was more through good luck than skillful horsemanship that kept her two cowboy attendants from fairly running into her as she sat with uplifted hand and bended ear.

A single shot rung out through the gathering gloom, evidently coming from a point almost directly in their path, sounding so clear and distinct that each one of the three riders instinctively looked for the bright flash which should have borne that sound company.

"An owl, no less, to be hunting at this hour!" muttered Widow Kate, as she gazed keenly ahead through the shadows.

"A two-legged owl, I'm thinkin', then, boss!" came a kindly growl, as one of the cowboys quickly sent his horse before the lady as a further safeguard against possible danger.

"It's Irish ye ought to be, Johnny Morgan, if only for that same," laughed Mrs. Malin.

Just then two more shots rung forth, apparently from the same point, and that a familiar clump of timber close alongside of which the trail to the "Gridiron Ranch" took its course.

"All eyes open, Jack!" sharply uttered Morgan, bringing his Winchester up from its slings ready for use. "It's more blood than feathers they're hunting out yen' way!"

"Ef ye wouldn't mind givin' us elbow-room, boss," half coaxingly said Jack, passing his mistress by to join his mate.

Widow Kate kept her ground, though she seemed anything but frightened at the prospect of a hot skirmish with night-riders or marauders. She produced a very business-like revolver from the belt that encircled her trim waist, lifting the hammer and twirling the polished cylinder around by running it across her other palm.

"Mind ye, lads, no shooting at shadows!" she said, with a low laugh that sounded like music itself. "Cartridges come high, and ye're the boys that delights in wasting them—for the noise itself, I'm thinking, just!"

"Stiddy, Jack!" sharply breathed Morgan, bending low over his pommel and curving a hand over his brows to concentrate his sight as much as possible. "I kin ketch a hoss—out yen' way—so!"

Faintly at first, but then growing sharper, clearer, more distinct, the rapid stroke of hoofs came echoing back from the dry plain. And, even as the trio strained their eyes in order to catch sight of the rider, a dim, phantom-like shape grew out of the gloom ahead.

Nothing but a shadow at first, for just there the background seemed unusually dense, and the shape itself could best be seen by looking a trifle to one side of where it really was; but then came a change.

The rapidly-moving shape passed on until it showed against the sky-line, and almost simultaneously the watchers betrayed their recognition.

"It's Riata Rob, fer sure!"

"For your life, hold hard!" sharply breathed the Widow Malin, sending her horse forward to check any possible indiscretion on the part of her cowboys. "Sure, it's a friend! Harm him, and I'll be the death o' ye both, man!"

Acting like a wedge, her horse pushed the cowboys violently to either side, but they were fairly well used to Widow Kate's impetuous actions, and took this new instance as a matter of course.

"He'd take the job off o' yer hands, ma'am,

too quick!" grunted John Morgan, steadying his horse and laughing grimly. "No need. We ain't truckin' with him—we ain't!"

"Not fer a dollar, an'—Wal, I be durned!"

That forward plunge of the widow's horse had apparently caught the ears of the ghost-like rider, for he came to an abrupt halt, seemingly scrutinizing the little party. But, before Widow Kate could determine whether or no to invite closer attention, the horseman wheeled at a sharp angle and sped swiftly away through the night.

"Ye frightened him with your wild Irish didoes, faith!" pettishly ejaculated Mrs. Malin, giving her steed a vicious touch of the spur that sent him leaping forward as though about to make hot chase, only to wrench him up shortly an instant later.

A neatly-gloved hand lifted a silver horn to her lips, sending forth a peculiar note, full of music, yet with a touch of diabolism that marked it as "the widow's own" throughout all that vast range.

The rider was barely visible, now, thanks to the rapidly-increasing twilight, but Mrs. Kate could almost swear that she saw him turn chin on shoulder, as though recognizing that characteristic *mot*. And with a deepening flush creeping into her comely face, she repeated the musical challenge, clearer, sharper than before.

Only to flush until her cheeks fairly tingled, for the mysterious horseman faded completely out of sight an instant later.

"Good manners go with ye, Rob Run-over!" spitefully crossed her rich red lips as she dropped the silver bugle to her side, wrenching the head of her horse around to resume her homeward journey.

If Morgan, or Jack, his mate, noticed her chagrin, be sure they were by far too shrewd to let that fact be seen, for, with all her good qualities, and they were many, Widow Kate could be a bit of a virago when the wind blew from the right quarter.

But that evening's adventures had not yet come to an end, and once more the rattle of firearms came sharply through the darkness: three shots in swift succession, and all coming from apparently the same spot as before.

"Trouble brewin', or I'm a howler!" snapped John Morgan, catching the widow's bridle-rein and checking her advance.

"Will ye find it out, or must I show ye the way, Johnny Morgan?"

"I'm the boy, boss. Eyes on all sides o' ye, Jack, for if harm should come to the widow, salt couldn't begin to save one side o' ye!"

With that blunt but heartily sincere speech, Morgan leaped out of the saddle, leaving his horse standing while he crouched low down and vanished like an unsubstantial shadow.

Widow Kate fidgeted uneasily in her saddle, but she accepted the situation, though she would greatly have preferred a more active part.

A truer woman never lived than this same Widow Kate Malin, though many might have faulted her for being a bit too masculine in words and actions. Not in the hearing of her cowboys, though!

In their estimation "Widow Kate" was simply perfection, and a hint to the contrary would bring forth hot lead and cold steel at a moment's warning.

"Could ye see him clearly enough to be sure, Jack Caper?" Widow Kate asked, after a few moments of silent watching and listening. "Was it anybody ye knew, over yonder, I'm asking ye, man?"

"I tuck it for Riata, boss, but ef it was, he acted mighty queer in riding off the way he did."

"And it's you that's setting yourself up as a judge of the gentry, then, Jack Caper? There's little the matter with the conceit o' ye, anyway, my fine fellow!"

Swish! came the daintily-braided quirt along the riding-habit, and Jack Caper instinctively edged off a bit as though more than expecting a touch of the same lash across his own broad shoulders.

He was a bit sluggish of wit, but he could see that Widow Kate was in anything but a pleasant mood just then, and he knew enough to hold his tongue without being more plainly bidden.

Minute after minute crept slowly by without sound from the motte ahead. The widow fidgeted impatiently, bits of speech drifting across her red lips, and she was almost on the point of giving her worrying steed free rein to dash ahead and complete the investigation for herself, when John Morgan came gliding rapidly up to her side.

"Is it to say breakfast is waiting, I want to know?" Widow Kate broke forth without giving her messenger a chance to report. "Ye'll never scorch the leather that's put into the boots o' ye, Johnny!"

"I was fast enough to learn what ye sent me for, boss, an' that's a man critter under the trees with anyway one healthy leak into him!"

"Who is it? Did he do the shooting?"

"Then he's a monstrous clumsy hand with a gun, I'm tellin' ye," with a grim emphasis as he took charge of his horse once more. "Growin' cold when I stumbled over his karkiss. Maybe—"

Wal, Riata Rob was comin' from that way, wasn't he?"

"Don't be a bigger idiot than nature intended, Johnny Morgan!" impatiently flashed Widow Kate, sending her horse forward. "Wasn't it three shots we heard after that?"

"Wasn't it three shots before, just the same?" muttered Morgan, but in tones too guarded to reach even those keen ears, as he leaped into the saddle and spurred ahead of his impetuous young mistress.

"I'll strike a light if ye think it best, ma'am, an' then—"

"Act, not talk, man alive!" sharply flashed the widow, leaping from her saddle but pausing at the edge of the undergrowth.

Morgan hardly needed that verba spur, and almost instantly a flickering light sprung into existence, fed by a practiced hand with dry leaves and tiny twigs until it gathered strength sufficient for heartier food.

By the first rays of light Widow Kate made her way through the outer fringe of undergrowth, soon standing by the side of a dark figure lying in an awkward heap only a few paces away from where stood a horse fastened to a stunted tree.

Dropping to her knees, Widow Kate gently slipped one hand over the region of the heart, drawing back sharply with the words:

"I thought ye said he was dead, Johnny Morgan!"

"Waal, he felt that way, an' I didn't hev time to 'zamine into it so monstrous close, ma'am, fer I knowed you'd be—that is—"

"Give me your flask, man!" was her sharp interruption, as she held out an impatient hand. "Will ye stand there and talk away the little life he has left him? Is it the likes o' that I pay ye wages for, I'd be asking ye? The whisky, man!"

With clumsy haste Morgan complied, but even then he ventured to hint that perhaps his aid might be more suitable in such an emergency.

"And I mean ye shall give it, Johnny Morgan," grimly nodded the widow, as she once more knelt beside the unconscious stranger. "Ye'll go ride for the doctor, Johnny; he'll be at the pavilion, I'm thinking, if the keg hasn't run clean dry this early. And you—Jack Caper!"

"Yes, ma'am, boss!"

"Jump your horse and ride home as if the devil was after ye! Get blankets for a litter, and bring back some o' the lads with ye to help carry this—gentleman, say, until we know him better!"

Jack Caper immediately sprung for his horse, but Morgan lingered.

"Ef you'll let me guard ye homefu'st, ma'am, why, then I'll break my neck a-ridin' if ye like it that way. But—"

"Go now, at once!" springing to her feet with hand on her pistol. "Will ye make me shoot you for a rebel, Johnny Morgan?"

With a groan that was little less than a curse Morgan flung himself into the saddle and thundered away, while Widow Kate turned to see the wounded man feebly essaying to arise.

"Easy, man!" she cried, gently pressing him back again. "It's good friends that's caring for ye now, but you must help all you can."

"Help—that pitiless demon—kill me!" panted the stranger, casting a troubled glance around them as his head fell back.

"Whom do you mean? Who hurt you?" quickly asked Widow Malin.

"He murdered me—Robert Runnover!"

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE WIDOW CAUGHT A KLAM.

MRS. MALIN started back with a sharp cry that contained far more of indignation than of surprise.

"You say that to the very face o' me? You dare accuse him of such a foul crime? Why, man alive—"

She broke off abruptly at that ejaculation. Was he alive?

He seemed far more like a corpse, and, as she noted his fallen jaw, his ghastly pallor, his motionless form, Kate Malin shrunk still further away, with more of awe and fear than she had experienced for many a long day past.

Only for a single breath. Then, rallying, she sprung forward and knelt by his side, lifting his head on one arm while holding the flask to his lips.

The strong liquor trickled out of his mouth, dripping down over his throat. He gave no sign of life. He lay a dead, sluggish weight on her arm, and with a swift return of that fear—the curious dread which even the bravest of us all must feel when suddenly brought into contact with violent death—the woman shrunk back and arose to her feet.

Had he died with that atrociously false accusation warm upon his lips? Had his soul gone out upon the wings of a hideous lie? Or—

"He never—he couldn't!" the woman panted, one hand pressed over her wildly-throbbing heart. "He do murder? Robert Runnover? I'd never give ear to it though an angel fresh from heaven should make the foul charge!"

And yet—a shiver crept over her queenly

form as she recalled that graceful figure on horseback, caught sight of but a few short minutes before.

"It was not Rob;—or if it was, the fault lay at your door!" she muttered, her voice almost harsh as she glanced back at that blood-marked face lying against the earth.

The frail fire was beginning to die down, and Widow Kate hastened to renew its glow by gathering a handful of twigs and sticks. She worked feverishly, but through it all she could hear that bitter accusation:

"He murdered me! Robert Runnover did the foul deed!"

A dying man would hardly waste his last breath by uttering a terrible perjury; still, it was a lie—a terrible mistake on his part!

"Don't—don't let him—"

A faint scream parted her lips as she turned around to see the man whom she had supposed a corpse, once more striving to lift himself on his weak hands, a look of curiously-blended fear and hatred filling his face and causing his little eyes to glitter feverishly.

That was Widow Kate's last outward token of nervousness. She caught up the whisky-flask, which, fortunately, had dropped right side up in a little nest of leaves, and with gentle force she made the wounded man take a generous swallow of the powerful liquor.

"Not a whimper from your lips, man, until I take a good look at the shape you're in," she firmly commanded, pressing a warm hand over his bearded lips as he attempted to speak. "I'm your best friend, just now, and ye want to pay me full obedience like I was the true mammy of ye—so ye do, now!"

In silence the stranger yielded, his little eyes growing smaller as their lids contracted. Yet they were rarely more keen than just now, weak though his hurts had left him for the time being.

He seemed puzzled to understand just what manner of creature had taken possession of him so unceremoniously, and those very doubts went a long way toward rallying him from that serious shock.

The widow soon learned that two bullets had struck him. One had cut a deep furrow through his scalp, but, so far as she could judge with such a poor light to guide her, had glanced from the bones without causing a fracture.

The other hurt seemed far more serious. The bullet had struck him not far below the heart on the left side, seemingly having passed directly through his body, since she found still another hole at his back.

With her handkerchief she managed to plug up both holes, and with her scarf she tightly bandaged the ugly wound, thus effectually checking hemorrhage until a more skillful hand could attend to the matter.

This done, she cast a keen, comprehensive glance about the little opening, taking note of much that would have escaped a less practical eye, putting on each item her own shrewd interpretation.

The horse was tethered near, in such a position that it could not be seen by any one riding along past the motte. The ground about the stunted tree was considerably trampled and cut up, as though the animal had stood there for at least several hours.

She picked up a revolver lying not far from the stranger, looking into its cylinder as she slowly revolved it. It was six-barreled, but only one cartridge remained loaded; five shells were empty!

"I used them to call help," faintly mumbled the stranger, noting her actions with an intentness curious in one who was seemingly hovering on the very verge of the grave. "I heard your—the sound of horses' feet."

"That accounts for three shots; how about the other two?"

"I fired them after him—that devil!"

"Whose other name is— What did you call him, a bit ago?"

Very innocently Widow Kate asked the question, drawing nearer the man so strangely thrown upon her care; but her cunning was wasted. Just then this man was too fiercely vengeful to even think of questioning words or motives.

"Robert Runnover—Riata Rob—curses cover him all over!"

He rose to a sitting posture despite his wounds, his right hand clinched and shaking viciously at vacancy. If wishes could kill, his assailant would have dropped in his tracks that second.

Mrs. Malin forced a laugh, her red lips curling as with amused scorn.

"Tell that to the marines, man alive! Rob Runnover is a man, white as they make 'em nowadays. You are worse than mad to accuse him of committing murder!"

"He did—I swear it!" was the almost fierce response. "He shot me down without a word of warning! If I die, I swear that my blood lies at his door! He murdered me—butchered me like a dog!"

"Shot you—that may be, stranger," deliberately resumed Widow Kate, now sitting on an old stump, her face half-encircled by her hands as she rested both elbows upon her knees, gazing intently into the haggard face of this

wounded stranger. "But not without warning. Not without cause. He isn't built that way!"

"You know him? He is your friend?"

"I know him, yes. My friend? Well, I'd hardly dare call him that to his face, though I'm counted a bold woman by many. But even if I like Rob Runnover just as little as you dare, I can't call him out of his real title; and that is spelled m-a-n!"

Through her half-closed lids Widow Kate caught the eager glow that leaped into the dark eyes of the stranger, and even before he uttered a word she knew her cunning bait had been swallowed.

"Then—you are his enemy, too?"

"I don't know who or what you are, sir," she slowly said, her face growing hard, her eyes glittering vividly. "But I'm free to say this much: I'd give my right hand to have a dead sure hold on Robert Runnover! A hold that only his death could break, mind you!"

If there was a double meaning to her words, he failed to catch it. He was shrewd enough to see that she meant all she said: that she was in almost deadly earnest; and believing he had fallen in with a valuable ally, he threw all further disguise to the winds.

"Bring Robert Runnover within reach of my hands and I'll show you that grip!" he cried, in tones marvelously strong for a man lying at the door of death.

"I thought as much!" with a note of exultation in her voice. "You are an officer of the law?"

He shrunk back, casting a quick, apprehensive glance around the dimly-lighted glade, as though afraid other ears might catch those words.

"You've let out too much, or too little, stranger," coldly said Mrs. Malin, but humoring his fears by dropping her voice a note lower. "I can and will save your life, but only on condition that you play white and trust me entirely. Why not, when neither of us asks anything better than to secure a firm hold over Robert Runnover?"

"Why do you hate him so bitterly?"

"After me is manners, sir!" bowed the widow with a short laugh in which lurked but the ghost of merriment. "If you haven't a card handy, a simple announcement of your name and profession may answer."

"My name is Gunter Klam, and I'm a detective."

"Your servant, Mr. Klam," rising and bowing low, more to hide her broad smile at his curious name than aught else. "My name is Widow Kate Malin, and I run the Harp of Erin Ranch. But don't ask for it by that title if you ever expect to be understood by the illiterate natives of these benighted parts; they've twisted my brand into a gridiron, and Gridiron Ranch it is forever and aye!"

"I'll never forget your name or your face, dear madam," earnestly declared Klam, a faint flush creeping into his haggard face, and something like a glow of admiration coming into his little eyes as they roved over that superb figure and that richly beautiful countenance. "Only for you, I must have died here, in darkness and alone! Only for you, that devil of sin would have escaped all punishment for his manifold crimes, the least of which is this brutal butchery of myself!"

Widow Kate uttered a hiss, placing a finger over her lips as she flashed a quick glance around them before uttering in low, guarded tones:

"No more of that, Mr. Klam, unless you're longing for the grave!"

"You don't mean—he isn't coming back?" faltered Klam, a hand dropping mechanically to his waist as though seeking a weapon, while he glanced hurriedly around the darkening glade.

Widow Kate rose to replenish the fire, then walked out to the edge of the timber, sweeping the dark plain as well as circumstances would permit before retracing her steps to the side of her patient.

"I do not believe he will dare come back this way, for he must know that some one has discovered the body of his last victim by this time. He passed us by, almost within hail, only—"

"You saw him? You can swear that it was Robert Runnover?" eagerly interrupted the wounded detective.

"I saw a horseman: I thought I recognized him," was the slow reply. "But what we must gain is proof positive, not mere belief. Now—I am going to talk to you without reserve, Mr. Klam, in case you and I are to play partners in this little game. You must be guided wholly by me while staying in these parts."

"Anything—just so that devil don't take alarm and to wing before I'm strong enough to put the nippers on!"

Widow Kate laughed almost contemptuously as she watched his face and noted his fierce speech.

"Why talk of his running away? Where could he find a safer place than right here at home, where almost everybody loves him as

much as they loathe and hate men of your profession? Why, man! were I but to let drop a hint as to your being a bloodhound of the law, even among my own gallant cowboys, they'd bury you too deep for Gabriel's horn to rouse at the Day of Judgment!"

Klam shrunk back a bit, a hunted, desperate look coming into his haggard face. He seemed to feel that he had been betrayed, but as he caught the rapid clatter of approaching hoofs, he gasped hoarsely:

"Give me my gun—he's coming back to finish his foul work!"

CHAPTER V.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

SYBIL PARRY flung out one hand with a gesture as easily understood as it is difficult to describe.

"Oh, he! Be sure Owen Taylor will give you no cause for even hard words while there is light enough left by which to mark his actions. If it was dark, now!"

"You hate him, then? Good!" with a low laugh as he caught the hand nearest him and pressed it ardently under cover. "That makes one more bond between us, little lady!"

There was no time for further interchange, for Felix Parry and his companion were rapidly drawing near, the one flushed and angry seeming, the other cool and blandly smiling, just as though he felt himself on the point of meeting the dearest friends the whole world contained for him.

"Hallo, sis!" the young rancher cried out sharply, as he drew near, wrenching up his foaming horse barely in time to keep from actually running into that ridden by Riata Rob. "Not in nearly such a big hurry as you were when this hot-head coaxed or dared you into leaping the ditch back yonder, are you?"

"Don't crowd, if you please, brother!" her whip cutting across the face of his panting mount, sending it back with a scrambling of hoofs that tore the grass and cast the dust up in a little cloud. "I'm sure we're just as near home, and with considerably fresher nags; what more can you ask?"

"Your promise not to risk your pretty neck again by following the lead of a—"

"It was my choice, and Mr. Runnoyer simply followed my example," quickly interposed Sybil, with a swift, appealing glance into the pale, hard-set face of her betrothed.

She knew how hot his temper was, and how well-founded was his reputation for striking first and listening afterward. She saw that her brother had been drinking freely, and that he was ripe for picking a quarrel with the man whom he had never loved, but who now seemed to be an object of actual hatred, thanks to the baleful influence exerted by this Owen Taylor.

"You and I will never quarrel on that point, Felix," said Riata Rob, his tones quiet but his manner emphatic. "Miss Parry's life is far too precious to us both for it to be risked, even in thought."

"All the same, it was a fool trick!" muttered the young man, joining company with them as Sybil once more put her horse in motion.

"Which will never be repeated. Did you notice?" shivering a bit as that terrible picture recurred to her brain. "The rock gave way, and the air-bridge is broken forever!"

"That's just what I'm kicking about, sis; suppose it had fallen when you started to take the leap?"

"My horse loosened the rock, and then—"

"It made a jolly old clatter going down, be sure!" quickly interposed Rob, risking a little rudeness for the sake of changing the subject before more harm was done. "Well, it will lessen temptation if it lengthens the trail, and may possibly save some one a broken neck. A few minutes' earlier start will take us all to the grounds in equal time."

Owen Taylor laughed softly as he said:

"Funny, isn't it, to think how different the coming will be from the going, for all save one or two lucky souls! Of course Miss Parry is secure, and possibly Mr. Runnoyer, though in his case a few of us stubborn ones will cling to hope while we may."

"Clinging won't save his title, though," bluntly chimed in Felix, then turning directly to Rob as he added: "Don't forget to bring the badge with you, Runnoyer. I'll save you the trouble of toting it back again."

"Felix!"

"That's all right, sis," with a nod. "You stick to your knitting, and if the pill promises to be bitter, try to sugar-coat it with the memory that you've had your turn, like some others I might name."

"One of whom I am?" quietly smiled Rob.

"Since you ask it—yes!"

"I caught the hint quicker than I might have done, because I've been thinking something of the same sort. I have had my turn, and if I knew it would even a little bit smooth the path of a friend, I'd draw out of the lists for good and all."

"Casting an anchor 'a' windward!" sneered Felix Parry.

Rob flushed hotly, then his color died away, leaving his fine cut features cold and hard as

ice. His strong right hand involuntarily clinched tightly, and had those words come through other lips a blow would surely have cut them short.

Even Felix Parry seemed to anticipate something of the sort, for he held himself ready to repel or return the blow, but Sybil sent her horse quickly between the two riders, crowding them apart, her eyes seeming to flash fire, her face pale, her voice stern and rebuking.

"For shame, Felix Parry! You have been drinking, or you'd never so far forget your breeding."

"Evil communications, you know, Miss Parry," bowed Runnoyer, his dark eyes flashing a wicked glance toward the quietly-smiling face of Owen Taylor, as though to point his incomplete quotation. "But Felix was only joking, where you seem to take it as earnest."

"Call it a jest, if you like it best that way," curtly nodded the young rancher. "All the same, you might act more foolishly than to draw out while your credit is good, for it's dollars to dimes that you never wear away the badge you bring to the grounds to-morrow!"

"I can imagine a much worse disappointment, Parry. I have lost a friend whose good will I value far above all the gilt medals ever designed."

"Why don't you advertise? I haven't seen him."

It was like a brutal blow, and Rob caught his breath sharply. But once more Sybil came to the rescue, her musical notes full of just anger:

"Why advertise for what is not worth picking up? Such friends are worse than no friends, and Mr. Runnoyer will never lack for friendship richly worth having."

"Yours alone would make him rich for life, Miss Parry," bowed Owen Taylor, a tinge of color coming into his bronzed face.

"While it lasts," coarsely added Felix, plainly bent on making himself disagreeable. "When you come back, covered with dust and defeat, Riata, sis here will be slowest of the slow to recognize one from whom she has nothing more to hope in the way of honors."

"Felix!"

"You think it's such a dead sure thing, then?" smiled Rob, the tips of his white teeth just visible beneath his jetty mustaches. "Then I'd be wise to resign the championship while I have the chance?"

"I'm betting even money that I crown the queen of the range to-morrow! And I'll lay your own odds that you don't carry off the medal yourself!" recklessly cried Parry.

"I told you I had been seriously thinking of drawing off, and not competing in the games this year," gravely began Runnoyer, only to be cut short by Sybil, her voice impetuous, her blue eyes glowing until they seemed backed by living fire in the coming twilight.

"You shall not—you must not!" she cried, catching his arm with nervous force. "What would they all say?"

"That Riata Rob was growing wise beyond his years!" sneeringly laughed her brother.

"You hear that?" her tones growing harder. "Though it is bad whisky that speaks through the tongue of my brother, it is only an echo of what other reckless lips might say in their joy at having their greatest obstacle removed. No! you must defend your title, Champion Rob! I ask it—and I give you my colors to defend with the title!"

Swiftly plucking the knot of blue ribbons from her throat, Sybil Parry pinned them to his shoulder, then flashed a half-proud, half-angry glance into the faces of their uninvited companions.

"Your lightest wish is law to me," said Rob, bending over her gloved hand, then boldly facing the two men with: "Sorry for your newborn hopes, gentlemen, but the die is cast now! I have more than the championship to defend, and under these colors I can't possibly fail."

"Money talks louder than wind, and my money says that you'll not only lose the medal, but that I can furnish a critter that you can't throw and tie inside of two minutes!" returned Felix, excitedly.

"I'll do it for fun, Parry. I never bet with a friend."

"Does that let me out, too?" quietly asked Taylor, who had contented himself with closely watching the play, like one who feels that his work is being done for him free of cost. If I may look for an opening, I'll go friend Parry one better; I'll agree to supply an animal which you can't throw and tie, according to rule, in ten minutes."

Instantly Rob appeared another man. Toward Felix Parry he felt as though in chains, but with this man all was different, and he spoke out curtly enough:

"Name your figures, and if it's anything more than wind, I'll clinch the bargain, too mighty quick!"

"Not now—not here!" sharply cried Sybil, seeming half-distracted by so many abrupt changes, and fearing she hardly knew what. "There is a proper time and place for such things, if you must bet."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Parry," bowed Taylor, his manner quickly altering. "I will not

persist in offending, but if Mr. Runnoyer still holds to the same mind in the morning, I'll see him again."

He wheeled his horse, which action brought him into brief contact with Felix. A deft touch on the arm told that young man that it was time for them to beat a retreat, and though he hesitated for a brief space, reluctant to leave the lovers together, the strange influence which this cool-nerved, stony-faced man had won over him in such a short time, proved strong enough to lead him away toward the now visible ranch at a gallop.

"Are you really angry with me, Sybil?" softly asked Rob, as their horses walked leisurely toward Good Luck Ranch. "Of course I couldn't bet with Felix, but that little villain—"

"I'm afraid of him, Robert!" exclaimed the maiden, with a long breath which was almost a sigh. "He means you evil. He has led Felix to hate you, and I fear that they are plotting mischief together!"

"He'll never hatch a second plot, be sure!" grimly laughed the young rancher. "To-morrow is coming, and unless he takes water, I'll read him a lesson that will last his life out!"

"To-morrow! I wish it was past and gone!" sighed Sybil.

Rob gently stole an arm about her waist, leaning over until his warm lips could brush her cool brow as he softly whispered:

"If you fear so much, little lady, it's not too late even yet. I'll resign the badge and draw out—for your sweet sake, darling!"

"Never!" all her proud spirit returning at the bare thought. "They would say it was fear that led you to withdraw! It would be a lie, but I'd almost rather see you dead than—Look!"

She pointed to where a single horseman was swiftly approaching them, riding as though life and death hung on his horse's heels.

"It's Billy Black, and he rides as though—This way!" cried Riata Rob, lifting his voice and swinging his hat high in air. "You're looking for me, Billy? What's gone wrong at Run-over Ranch?"

"Thank the Lord I've ketched ye up, boss!" panted the cowboy, his face very pale, his manner showing strong agitation. "The old boss—"

"My father—what of him, man?" sharply interrupted Riata.

"Waal, he's—he's dead, I do reckon, boss!"

CHAPTER VI.

WAS IT A PHANTOM OF THE BRAIN?

A LITTLE earlier in the afternoon of that same eventful day, Jason Runnoyer was riding slowly across the prairie toward his home.

In common with nearly every able-bodied man on that vast range, he had been attending the general round-up, just then coming to a natural ending, but, unlike the majority, he had taken his leave at an early hour.

Never what might be called a social being, on this day in particular the grim owner of "Run-over Ranch" seemed in a gloomy mood, his sarcastic tongue and blunt manners driving from his side even those who might wish to be friendly; and they were few and far between.

A peculiar man in many respects—a "crank," as others dubbed him—Jason Runnoyer had never so openly betrayed his peculiarities as he had of recent days.

Although he had been one of the earliest settlers in that portion of Texas, growing steadily rich and richer, owning vast herds of horns and hoofs, Runnoyer had never won what is termed popularity. On the contrary, he seemed to take pleasure in alienating those who did seek to build up close friendship, and to glory in standing alone, grim, sarcastic, rugged, defiant.

He had but one son living with him, and no one ever heard him mention a wife. Of course he must have had one, once, but who she was, or how he had lost her, none of his present neighbors seemed to know.

Up to within a few weeks past, at least; then, coming from what source no one seemed able to even guess, vague, unpleasant rumors began to float about, touching on the past life of this grim and solitary ranchman, and some of them even hinting at a dark and bloody page in his career.

It was by means of these rumors that Felix Parry found excuse for branding Riata Rob as of impure blood, for one of them gave his mother as being a Mexican girl of low-caste degree.

"Who set these cursed lies afloat?" the grim old rancher was muttering as he rode slowly homeward, his reins hanging free, his head bowed, his gaunt, muscular form bent and relaxed. "Who is trying to rake up the bitter past? If I could find out? If I only could!"

His sinewy hands clinched tightly, lifting to quiver for a single breath before his swelling chest, his eyes—steel-gray, like those of his son, and forming such a startling contrast with their almost jet-black hair—flashed vividly.

Only for a brief space; then, his head still bowed, he rode slowly onward, lost in deep and bitter thought.

His horse seemed used to such moods, for, though high-strung and spirited to a fault, it walked slowly along the scarcely-marked trail, its head lowered, its eyes half closed.

Then—

The earth seemed to fly upward and strike Jason Runnover a terrible blow, hurling him high into the air, to revolve swiftly like a wheel in motion, and to fall as over a precipice, bringing up short with a horrible shock that seemed to crush his bones to powder, his flesh to pomace!

Or—was it all a dream?

He seemed dead, yet living. He could not move a limb, yet his eyes were open and he could see dim, phantom-like figures moving silently about him.

He tried to cry aloud, to spring up and face his foes, if foes they were, but all in vain. He could not move a muscle. He was unable to utter a sound. He began to doubt if he could even breathe.

A phantom shape drew closer to him, bending over him as he lay so helpless. A strangely pale face seemed to settle down over his own, but, growing less distinct the nearer it came, until at length he could only distinguish a pair of eyes—were they human eyes?

They seemed too large—and they were spreading, widening and growing broader until—if he could but droop his own lids for a moment! Those horrible eyes seemed cold as ice, yet they were scorching his eyeballs until fire seemed pouring into his dizzily whirling brain.

Were they eyes? Only a moment before they had seemed large enough to blanket the universe, but now—ugh! Tiny points of light like diamonds, boring, boring their way deep and deeper through his skull.

Surely they were not human eyes! They were made of crystal—they were twin windows through which he was gazing at—what?

If he only could see clearer! If those dim, misty pictures dancing about so far away—millions of miles beyond the crystal windows through which he was straining his eyes—if those pictures would only come closer.

He could just make out living, moving, breathing shapes, but at such a distance that it was impossible to be sure of their faces. And yet, was that the girl whom he had known, so many years ago? Was that the darkly beautiful face over which he had gone mad?

He tried again to cry out. He wanted to beg the magician who was officiating to reverse those windows, for he had given him the wrong side of the lenses to look through.

He seemed to cry out, though he could not hear the sound of his own voice. Yet, he must have cried out, else why did those horrible, great eyes come back to cover him over as with a stifling pall? For they gradually darkened, turning from gray to black, from black to utter midnight darkness.

And when they had wrapped him up in a thousand folds they seemed to have the power of moving him from the earth itself! They seemed to be floating him through the atmosphere, carrying him—whither?

A dull roaring filled his ears, as though a hurricane was steadily pouring over his grave. For now he was dead—only the grave could own that damp, musty, sickening smell!

His eyes were open, yet he could see nothing. An enormous weight appeared to rest upon his bosom, painlessly, yet none the less surely crushing him out flat until— Would he spread over as much surface as had those hideous eyes?

Surely he was dead and in his grave! And yet—

Slowly and by degrees a dim light crept through that intense darkness, casting around him a strange pink glow that deepened into red—the ugly red of freshly-flowing blood!

That dull roaring grew fainter, though never entirely ceasing, and though he still firmly believed that death had claimed him as its prey—that he was confined and in his grave—Jason Runnover was conscious of a certain languid curiosity dawning upon his brain as he stared straight ahead, wondering what was to come next—wondered, until those enormous eyes came floating back, to once more settle over his face like a clammy blanket of dead flesh.

Then, as once before, they began to contract and gather all their light to their centers, until they again resembled diamond drills, red-hot and boring, boring, still boring twin holes through his brain and his skull.

And presently he was once more gazing through those curious windows of crystal, to see—Ha!

They had been reversed, and now magnified instead of diminished the curious pictures spread out far away beyond them.

"Look, Jason Runnover!" came a voice that seemed to find a dwelling-place within his very skull. "Can you recognize aught of truth in this picture?"

A rosy veil seemingly dropped before the crystal windows, lending to all objects beyond it a misty look, but not blotting them out entirely. It was as though one was gazing through the sparkling spray of a waterfall, only the hue was that of scarlet blood.

He saw two figures, male and female, walking slowly side by side through a vale of flowers. There was something strangely familiar about the shapes; he could have called aloud the names of both the man and the maiden; he was still making the effort, when they turned swiftly about, staring fixedly into his own face.

Now he knew! That man was himself, years ago! That girl was—

"The angel wife whose heart you ground in the dust beneath your iron heel, Jason Runnover!" harshly uttered that inner voice, as a black pall seemed to fall over his face and extinguish his eyesight forever.

Not for long; the pall lifted, and though the strange mist still hung before his eyes, it now showed nearly white, like snow just tinged with the last rays of a declining sun.

Beyond it slowly flowed the white waters of a river, its smooth surface reflecting back the silvery rays of a full moon. On either side of this silver path the shadows lay dark and chilling.

Then, floating feet foremost, lightly clad in white that might have been the robes of night, came a human figure out of the shadow into the white light. Inch by inch, but oh! so slowly to that tortured man in his coffin—for surely he was dead, and surely these were but phantoms of the nether world?

Floating on, little by little, until the entire body was revealed to his painfully-aching eyes. Then—the ghastly white face came into view, its black hair partly covering the marble neck, its great eyes staring sightlessly upward. And, once more he recognized that fair face—once more that pitiless voice from out his aching skull:

"Driven to death by—her loving husband!"

The body floated on through the moonlight, and, as it disappeared, so too did utter darkness once more blot out his eyesight.

Only for a short time, and after that those horrible eyes did not come back to him. The changes were more rapid, the figures and faces alone seeming to come into view and fade out as the light grew more or less strong.

He saw a figure marvelously like his own gaunt shape, but bent and emaciated, clad in rags and bound in heavy manacles. So like his own figure that when the gray head was slowly lifted until he could distinguish the features, he felt relief rather than surprise at recognizing his own face. His own, yet so terribly changed!

"Starving for a crust, and Jason Runnover owner of countless herds and unnumbered flocks!" croaked that dismal voice once more.

The scene shifted, and it seemed to be night—night, yet not too dark for him to recognize those two figures amid the gloom. One was that of his son, Riata Rob, and with cruel knife tight-clinched in his hand he was leaping upon the other man, from behind, to strike him a coward's blow between the shoulders!

"The cowardly spawn of an unnatural father!" croaked that grim monitor in needless explanation.

There was a longer period of darkness now than usual, or so it seemed to the tortured man lying so helpless. And though he strove to cast off that hideous spell, all was in vain. If he had indeed been a corpse and in his coffin, he could not have been more impotent.

The light came back in a dazzling flash that blinded him for the moment, and it was only by degrees that he could accustom himself to it sufficiently to recognize the more prominent figure pictured before him—a man hanging by the neck from a rude gallows, his face hideously distorted, yet only too readily recognizable as that of Riata Rob, his own idolized son! And, with one quivering hand he was pointing to the cowering shape of Jason, harshly gasping:

"Eternal curses on you, father! Through your evil examples I die the death of a dog!"

CHAPTER VII.

DID JASON SEE A GHOST?

SURELY mortal man was never cursed with a more terribly realistic dream than this!

The haunted rancher could see it all so clearly. Not a single detail was lacking: that well-known form, that handsome face, which even the distortion of hatred, death and despair could not render altogether repulsive, that quivering hand as it pointed him out, Jason's own double!

And then that familiar yet hideously disguised voice—the tone of one whose windpipe is being closed by the horrors of slow strangulation—

With an effort so desperate that it seemed to burst his lungs and rend his windpipe wide, Runnover broke that hideous spell with a mad-dened yell. But when he strove to spring forward and tear that shameful noose from about the throat of his idolized son, utter darkness suddenly came again, and once more the earth seemed to rise up—topple over—crush him down beneath its weight.

Slowly and by degrees the senses of the grim old ranchero returned to him.

The clear, mellow light of that pleasant evening came melting through his closed lids, causing them to quiver, to twitch, to heavily

lift until his aching balls rested upon a narrow line of blue sky, just beginning to tinge with pink-gold as the sun lingered near the prairie-line far away.

A moan parted his lips as his lids closed and his face turned a bit to one side, for he mistook that light for another change in the series of frightful visions with which he had been so pitilessly tortured; but a blade of half-dry grass tickled his nostril, and a grasshopper flew into his face, kicking and buzzing as its horny legs became tangled in his luxuriant beard.

"It isn't—Thank God!"

His eyes flew wide open now, and he sat up with a jerk, pressing both hands to his aching head as he stared dizzily around him.

"It is all a horrible dream," muttered the now conscious ranch-owner.

It was day, and this was really the upper world! He could not be dead, for—yonder was a horse, lazily cropping the grass, and—

"Cruiser, old boy!"

At the sound of its name, the horse lifted its head and looked around, whimpering softly as it caught the gaze of its master. And as Jason Runnover lifted a hand with that familiar snapping of his fingers, Cruiser came quickly up to where the ranchero half lay.

Not until he could touch that velvety muzzle with his own hand, feeling it warm and living, could the rancher give his senses full belief, so hideously real had those visions appeared.

"You're living, sure enough, Cruiser, old fellow!" he muttered, with a long breath of relief, slipping his hand along that thick mane and using it as a lever by which he could regain his footing.

The effort seemed to drive all the blood in his body to his head, and clinging dizzily to Cruiser, Runnover closed his eyes and shivered like one in a chill.

His brain throbbed as though it must split asunder, yet it was not accompanied by much pain; the sensation was horribly queer; he had never experienced anything like it before.

"It's a stroke. If I can only get to the ranch!"

This, with an intense longing to see his son once more, seemed to give Jason the strength to fight back that terribly sickening sensation, and little by little the red mist faded away from before his eyes, leaving his wits comparatively clear, though he was still too weak for climbing into the saddle.

Steadied by his clutch on the neck of Cruiser, Runnover glanced around him as though more than half expecting to catch a glimpse of mortal enemies; but none such met his eyes.

The prairie was devoid of animal life, save for himself and his good horse. If others had been nigh, no signs remained to betray that fact. And, so far as his shaken memory served, he knew that he now stood on or near the precise spot which he had occupied when that horrible stroke fell upon his brain.

"Was it a dream—or a stroke?" he huskily mumbled, his tongue feeling curiously thick and clumsy.

He climbed into the saddle and Cruiser moved off, stepping slow and gingerly as that bowed figure swayed unsteadily on its back. He may have reasoned that his master was drunk;—certainly one who saw him during those first few minutes would have so inferred.

If drunken, it was with the bitter lees from the cup of memory.

He groaned chokingly as he closed his eyes in the vain effort to shut out those terrible visions;—the convulsed face of his only child; the ghastly white yet peaceful face of his lost wife, floating down the cruel river in which she had gasped out her latest breath!

Cruiser started, pricking up his sharp ears and looking toward the *motte* of timber which they were just passing, and from the direction of which came floating that wild, wailing scream—the almost human cry of a panther, in all likelihood; but to the haunted ranchero it seemed far more than that.

"Dolores—mercy—forgive!" he hoarsely gasped, recoiling until only the instinctive swerving of the trained horse kept him from toppling out of the saddle. "They lied! I did not—"

He broke off with a wild cry as he fell forward along the neck of his horse, covering his eyes to shut out that phantom-like face, now stern and pitilessly accusing him of—murder!

His spurs pricked Cruiser sharply, though involuntarily, and with an angry snort the good steed plunged forward in a furious gallop, followed by another shrill, wailing cry from the timber island.

Instinctively Runnover gripped the heavy mane and kept his awkward balance, for he was past reasoning just then. And his cruel spurs kept raking the ribs or flanks of the tortured animal with every stretch of those magnificent limbs, while, with each and every drop of his thoroughbred blood at racing heat, Cruiser sped straight across the almost level plain to the gates of Run-over Ranch.

A cowboy saw them coming, and ran with shouts to intercept them, but he was too slow, Cruiser never slackened his pace until at the accustomed stopping-place before the ranch

proper. Then he halted, and so abruptly that the ranch-owner pitched over the horse's head, over the hitching-rack, to fall in a seemingly lifeless heap almost at his own door-step.

Limp, nerveless, his face a mask of dust and blood, his pulse barely perceptible to the unpracticed touch of the startled, white-faced and wide-eyed cowboys, little wonder that Billy Black took saddle and set off in a furious search for his young master to shock him with the belief that Jason Runnover was dead.

Tenderly enough the cowboys picked their old master up, bearing him into the building and placing him on his own bed. Then—for since Run-over Ranch had existed no woman had ever passed even a single night beneath its roof, much less found an abiding-place there—those rough-handed but soft-hearted men did all that lay in their power for their master.

They found bruises, but nothing like a serious wound, yet for more than half an hour they labored in vain to win even a sign of consciousness. Only for that slow, labored breathing they must have given Jason Runnover over for dead.

When they had exhausted all their resources—limited enough, lacking knife-thrust or bullet-hole to work at—Runnover amazed them all by abruptly rising in bed, and, after a single dazed glance around upon their startled faces, sharply, almost harshly ordering them out of his room.

Only one lingered at the door, and he because he caught the husky tones of his employer, who added, thickly, like one who had difficulty in finding the proper words, and still more troubled to utter them aright:

"When Robert comes home, say that I am waiting for him."

"Billy Black has gone to hurry him, boss," responded the cowboy; then, a little less freely, since he was speaking on his own account: "Ef you could jest pint out which way them durned critters went, boss, reckon we lads mought ketch 'em up, even yit."

But Jason only scowled, shaking both head and hand toward the door. And as he rose up in bed the cowboy quickly beat a retreat—to pause again, listening breathlessly for a lifeless fall on the floor. Instead, he heard Jason Runnover move a heavy chair near the little table and drop into it heavily; and after a bit, hearing no further sound, the cowboy crept silently back. Peering through the key-hole in the door, he saw Runnover sitting there, stiff and rigid, yet plainly alive. Waiting—for what but the coming of his son?

It was thus that Rob found his father, when he reached Run-over Ranch after a wildly reckless ride alone, for he had parted with Billy Black not far from Good-Luck Ranch, sending the faithful cowboy to the round-up pens in quest of Dr. John Beeman.

Riata leaped from the saddle without even checking his bay stallion, and, not stopping to ask or hear aught, made his way direct to his father's room, bursting open the door and uttering a sharp cry as he caught sight of that pale, haggard, terribly altered face before him.

"Steady, you young whirly-gust!" almost harshly cried Jason, but with a glad and a proud light leaping into his sunken eyes as they rested upon his son.

"Father—they told me you were dead!"

"Must I tell you that they lied, lad?" laughed the ranchero, but, reaching out a sinewy hand to meet the glad grasp of his boy. "I feared as much when I heard that Billy Black had taken saddle to hunt you up. I'll trim him down when we meet up the next time!"

Rob drew back; his gray eyes closely scrutinizing the face of his parent, noting each change for the worse with eyes sharpened by strong affection. And these were many, though Jason Runnover tried hard to lighten them by forcing a careless smile.

"You're worse hurt than you like me to see, father. What is it? Who dared to trouble you? Speak out—I will know it all!"

Jason laughed grimly. It was so like his own imperious nature!

"A bit shaken up, Robert," he admitted. "I'll confess that much, if you will have it that way. They caught me off my guard, and the old man had to go down."

"Who dared—when and where?" hotly cried the young ranchero, his eyes ablaze and a hand dropping to the pistols at his middle. "Out with it, father—give me the slightest clew, and I'll never know rest until I've evened it all up smooth!"

"I was waylaid and robbed;—that's enough for to-night," almost doggedly muttered the old man. "To-morrow I'll tell you the rest, but until then—God of mercy!" he almost shrieked, leaping to his feet and pointing toward the uncurtained window behind his son.

Riata wheeled swiftly, drawing a pistol, but the window was a blank, so far as his eyes were concerned.

"What is it, father? Who was it? What did you see?" he demanded.

Jason sunk into his chair, covering his eyes with trembling hands, but he managed to utter in strained, unnatural accents:

"A ghost—the ghost—of—your—murdered mother boy!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WIDOW'S IMPATIENT PATIENT.

MRS. MALIN sprung forward, one trimly-booted foot ready to dash apart the fire in case of need, her right hand armed, her queenly head inclined to listen. So terribly in earnest had been the wounded detective that a bit of his fear communicated itself to her nerves; but not for long.

It took more than one set of hoofs to make that growing clatter, and this, with the direction from whence the sounds came, told her how the case stood.

"Whist, man!" she cried, turning quickly toward Klam with a restraining gesture that at the same time lent him assurance of safety. "Tis only Jack on his way back with help from the Gridiron."

"You are a woman—you would not let me be butchered?" quavered the poor fellow, his nerves by no means what they ordinarily were, thanks to his hurts and free bleeding.

"Is it a heathen I am, then? Whist, I tell ye, man!" cutting his thanks short with an impatient gesture, turning her head and blowing a short, soft note upon her bugle.

A cheery shout came from the night beyond, proving that her judgment had not led her astray, and while the cowboys were halting at the edge of the timber, Widow Kate bent closer to Klam, hurriedly whispering:

"Put a lock on the two lips o' ye, man! Not a word of law, or them roaring lads of mine 'll rope and drag ye—with many a wild thanks for that same chance! D'ye mind that, now?"

A bit exaggerated, perhaps, but, just then, this wounded officer was too thoroughly shaken up to detect the acting, if acting it was. And before he could have learned better through scanning that comely face, Widow Kate was bustling away to scold Jack Caper and his mates for going to sleep alongside the trail.

"I done my level best, ma'am, boss," meekly declared the cowboy, with his curious compromise as to the proper title by which to address his imperious mistress and paymaster. "Ef anybody done any sleepin', the ribs o' my hoss don't say so. An' then the boys—"

"Please, ma'am, 'twasn't me, but my brother—don't I know the whole of it?" half-mimicked Widow Kate, adding briskly: "Fall to work before I've time to get good and angry, will ye, man? You know how to rig up a travois?"

"Which it is a Injun litter, ma'am, boss?"

"Which I'm not caring what ye call it, just so it comes in a hurry, and is fit for use when it gets here, Jack Caper," sharply from Mrs. Malin, as, turning away from the half-bewildered cowboy, she bent over the wounded detective.

"That's the good of a woman's tongue, and partly what 'twas given us for, d'ye mind, Mr. Klam," she said, half-laughingly. "Keep the lash cracking over their heads and they'll be meek as lambs, with never an ugly or dangerous thought stirring up the brains o' them all. But mind ye, honey, whist is still the word with you! Even I couldn't save a hair of your blessed head if the lads were once to suspect who and what ye are."

"I thank you, madam, but—somehow I don't believe I'm so dreadfully wounded, after all. Now that the bleeding has stopped, I almost feel that I could ride—could make my own way to safety."

"Up a tree if ye try it, Mr. Klam!"

"But surely you wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't I, then?" her black eyes glowing. "It's better ye'll know me a long week from now, Mr. Klam, and you can consider your invitation to the Gridiron to last that long at the very l'aste, sure!"

Gunter Klam cast a troubled look toward the cowboys, who were cutting and trimming two limber saplings across which to stretch the heavy blankets brought from the ranch for that purpose.

"Regular divils, the very l'aste of them," coolly nodded Widow Kate, as she interpreted his gloomy doubts. "For a simple bat of my poorest eye, they'd murder an angel with a smile on the face o' them so gentle you'd swear they were lapping milk. What, then, were I to say to them that ye scorned my invitation to sup and sleep?"

"But—Runnover?" hesitated the detective, uneasily.

"There ye've got it, Mr. Klam!" her eyes fairly snapping. "Maybe ye're not knowing to it, but there's a mighty feast-day at hand, and lacking Riata Rob that same would be flat and stale and unprofitable—ay! like Hamlet without the melancholy Dane, faith!"

"Then you're not—I can still count on you as an ally?"

"With all the joy of life, Mr. Klam! Only—sure, honey, 'twould be the death o' me were aught to spoil the sports of the morrow! Sooner than that—Promise by your hope of a hereafter that you'll keep the tongue of ye still until the sports are over, or I'll tell the lads that right forinst them stands their blackest bogle—I will, now!"

Jack Caper was approaching to inform his mistress that the litter was ready, and Klam had barely time to give the required pledge.

Though sorely shaken by his wounds and

narrow escape from instant death, he would have held his own far better with an armed foeman just then. This woman was an enigma to him, and even in his best case he would have been half afraid of her. Now, almost convinced that she was mad, he hastily gave the required pledge.

Under the directions of Widow Kate, the wounded man was soon placed upon the blanket-litter, the cowboys handling him tenderly as though he had been a new-born infant, bearing him through the fringe of undergrowth to the travois, and securing him in the hollowing bed. And then, with Widow Kate riding close beside him, the wounded man was borne from the scene of his nearly fatal adventure, over the plain and along to Gridiron Ranch.

Strong yet gentle hands lifted him from the litter and carried him inside the building, Widow Kate leading the way to her own private sitting-room, with her own hands wheeling out a broad, easy couch for the reception of the injured man.

Satisfying herself that Klam had received no perceptible injury from his transportation, and that the hasty bandage over his worst wound had not been displaced, Mrs. Malin dismissed her escort with orders to send in the doctor as soon as he should arrive.

The widow sat down where she could gain a fair view of her patient, but her recent talkative mood had apparently exhausted itself. Not only was she silent, but an imperious gesture cut short the question which Klam attempted to utter.

"Whist, man! Can't ye see I'm thinking?" she rebuked him.

There was no pretense in that, however else her recent actions may be regarded. She was thinking—on a subject which had caused her many a troubled and sleepless hour of recent days—ever since the betrothal of Riata Rob to Sybil Parry was publicly announced, in fact.

That was the canker in the widow's rose!

Even before Kinzey Malin died, the buxom Irishwoman had made a favorite of the dashing young ranchero, all in an innocent way, of course, for there was no real evil in Widow Kate, then nor now. And it was not until after the stalwart rancher was laid beneath the sod that she even began to suspect that her liking for the pretty lad—for up to then she had so called and so regarded Riata Rob—meant something deeper and stronger.

In fact, there were only a few months difference in their ages, though she had been a woman grown when Rob seemed but a boy, and of those few Widow Kate promptly lopped off enough to leave the balance in her own favor.

Unfortunately for her newly-born hopes, Riata had already lost his heart, and the dashing widow had only her trouble for her pains. He was insensible to all her charms, and then came the open announcement of his betrothal.

This was a bitter blow to Widow Kate, and for a few days after proving the report true, she led the dependents of Gridiron Ranch a weary life indeed. Then she settled down to plotting and planning.

She felt that she would do or dare almost anything short of actual murder, to break off that contemplated union. But how? Where could she strike the first blow? Where find the proper tools for use?

And it was while her brain was almost constantly busy with such uneasy thoughts that she met Gunter Klam.

Had she unexpectedly found the tool she required? Possibly—if she could temper it to her own liking!

"Do you know what I've been thinking about, Mr. Klam?" she abruptly asked, a curious gleam in her large eyes. "That it would have been money in your pocket if that bit of lead had cut your brow an inch lower!"

"It would have killed me!" with an uneasy start.

"Sure as a rope, and a vast deal easier," nodded Kate, coolly yawning behind her large but shapely hand. "Much easier than was the fate of the last poor devil who came up this way on much the same errand as brought you; a deputy sheriff, or something of that sort. I was out two good riatas by that bit of sport, I mind me, now!"

"You don't mean—"

"Why not, sure?" with a mild stare. "The silly fellow openly said that he came here to arrest a man for stealing horses down near the line, and of course the lads couldn't stand the likes o' that—how could they, now? So—well, 'twas an uncomfortable sight, to be sure, when the wild rascals got through with their bit o' sport, but I made the best of what they left. Anyway, I've tried to keep his grave green since—when it didn't slip the mind o' me clean!"

"And the horse-thief—he went clear?"

"Ob, no. The boys run him up a tree after the fun was over."

"Yet they mur—they killed the sheriff for trying to capture him? And he only a horse-thief?"

"Do you call it murder to crush such ver-

min?" with an indignant flash of her glorious eyes as she half-rose from her seat, only to sink back again with a polite smile as she nodded: "Excuse me, Mr. Klam. I clean forgot that you're a stranger to these parts, and none too well up in the customs of the country. Sure, they dragged the sheriff from principle, ye understand, and from no great dislike to the man himself. They'd do the same to an angel if one was foolish enough to come here after a fugitive, much less to arrest one of themselves. And so—"

Klam forced a sickly laugh, saying:

"You're trying to scare me, Mrs. Malin, but I'm an old hand, who—"

"Who'll never be older if a hint as to your real character slips outside of these four walls!" interjected the widow, her face growing hard and stern. "Let but a hint escape, and my own lads would laugh at my efforts to save a guest from their ropes. They would murder you by inches if they thought you meant harm to Riata Rob, their present idol. They would—"

She broke off abruptly at fresh sounds from outside, and while the wounded detective shrunk cowering on his couch, she flung wide the door to admit a tall, somewhat pompous-moving gentleman, whom she effusively greeted as Doctor John Beeman.

"There's work for you, doctor," stepping aside and waving a hand toward Klam. "Do what you can for the poor fellow, even if I did have to shoot him."

"You, madam? You shoot him?" ejaculated the astonished physician.

Widow Kate nodded her head emphatically as she replied:

"Why wouldn't I, doctor, dear? Could I stand by and let him rustle my pet horses, and not shoot him?"

CHAPTER IX.

OPENING A KLAM'S MOUTH.

WITH his fears freshly aroused by the grim hints Mrs. Malin had given, which his feverish brain lent more color than he would have granted had he been more his usual self, Gunter Klam was recovering from his fright when that startling charge was made by the woman who had found him almost at death's door.

He started up with an inarticulate cry, but, before he could find words for the indignant denial, Widow Kate was beside him, her strong white hands pressing him back on the pillow, her voice swiftly whispering in his ear:

"Whist, man! it's thief or thief-taker ye must own to, and the last means death at the heels of a wild horse!"

Drawing back, Widow Kate spoke aloud, contempt and pity seeming to blend in her tones as they formed the words:

"Be 'aisy, man, dear! Sure the doctor is a true friend to all in need of his care, and he'll never betray your secret while I beg him to hold it sacred. Will ye, doctor, dear?"

"Your wish is my law, Mrs. Malin," said the physician, bowing stiffly, but with a desire to please written all over his reddened face.

"But, curse it all!"

"Do you dare deny that I shot you down while in the act of stealing my stock?" coldly warned Mrs. Malin, her dark eyes beginning to show a wicked light as they caught and held those little orbs.

"No, not if you say so," groaned Klam, sinking back and shivering a bit as he closed his lids to shut out that wicked gleam.

"Ye see, doctor, dear, he's a bit verish with the hurts I gave him," easily explained Widow Kate, rolling up her sleeves like one preparing for work. "I fear I hurt the poor rascal worse than I meant, but we'll soon patch him up between us."

From any other lips Dr. Beeman would have resented such a term when connected with his professional services, but, like many another marriageable man of those parts, he was deeply in love with the rich and dashing young widow, and dared not gainsay her expressions.

Cowboy John Morgan had warned him what to expect, and he had come armed at all points. With the widow as assistant, he soon had the detective under inspection, and, after a critical examination, announced the result.

The man was not so badly injured but that, with care and quiet, he would pull safely through. The skull had not been fractured, and the body wound looked far worse than it really was, the lead having cracked a rib, but then glanced around the bone, only cutting the flesh until it emerged at his back. At no point had the body cavity been penetrated by the bullet.

When Dr. Beeman had completed his work, and the widow had insisted on his joining her in drinking speedy recovery to their patient in a glass of wine, she addressed him in tones plenty loud enough for Klam to drink in without trouble:

"You'll guard your secret sacredly, doctor, dear, unless you should hear that the fellow has run away without my leave. Should he do that, I give you leave to spread the news and offer a reward from me for his capture, dead or alive. D'ye mind, doctor, dear?"

"I will follow your instructions to the very letter, madam," he assured the widow, bending over her white hand with an air of utter devotion.

Mrs. Malin bore him company to the door, waiting until he had swung his rather stiff form into the saddle; she then came back to her unwilling prisoner, who lay groaning on the couch, inwardly cursing the ill-fortune that had cast him helplessly into such pitiless hands.

"You've branded me as a horse-thief, woman!" he cried, hot anger leaping into his eyes as Widow Kate dropped gracefully into a chair that stood facing his couch.

"Better a live thief than a dead detective, Mr. Klam," laughed Mrs. Malin, a touch of malice in her brilliant eyes. "I had to give some plausible explanation for your hurts, and though this one may be a bit galling to your pride, it will prove your surest safeguard in the end. For, if a different story was told—and Dr. Beeman will have it spread all over the range before another night!—be sure some curious body would keep prying about until your real profession was suspected if not actually discovered. Then—well, death to you would be the sweetest part of your reward for venturing up here in pursuit of Rob Runnover!"

"Are you all such barbarians?"

"If being true to friend and neighbor be barbarism—yes!" the widow nodded emphatically.

"Yet you promised—you said you would give your right hand just to get a dead-sure grip over Riata Rob!"

"And I told you nothing more than the simple truth."

"What wrong has he ever done you?"

"That's telling, and I'm the proper one to put questions, Mr. Klam, if you please. How do I know that you are anything better than a horse-thief, as I dubbed you a bit ago? How do I know that, as you say, Robert Runnover shot you, this evening? Why did he do that?"

"To cover his crooked trail—to keep from being dragged back to pay the penalty due his crimes!" flashed the detective, seeming to forget his wounds in the excitement of the moment.

Mrs. Malin was watching him closely the while, but, only that keen and steady gaze told how intensely she was interested in this matter. Her breath came evenly, her face was calm and slightly flushed, but with nothing more than her usual rich coloring.

Even in his strong excitement Gunter Klam could not help paying her this compliment in his mind: a prouder, more beautiful face had never before come under his notice.

She no longer wore the riding-habit in which she had first come under his gaze, but though her fresh dress fitted a trifle less snugly, it gave evidence of a superb figure, full and rounded, the perfection of health and strength without even a suspicion of coarseness or masculinity.

"Not so fast, if you please, Mr. Klam," quietly deprecated Widow Kate. "The night is before us, and you are a little too feverish to be able to sleep even were you to try off-hand. So, you are a detective?"

"I am," with a curt nod. "Shall I show you my authority?"

"Your word will serve, man, dear, for the present. As for anything more substantial, I'd advise ye to burn or destroy it at your first opportunity. A man is foolish indeed to carry about with him his own death-warrant."

"But you promised—"

"It's the lads, not poor me, you want to watch," with a little laugh that sent a thrill down his spine. "What documents have ye that could endanger your life with them?"

"I have a warrant for the arrest of Robert Runnover, as a fugitive murderer."

"Is it that bad, then?" echoed the widow, her eyes opening widely with undisguised surprise. "Riata Rob—a murderer?"

"That is only one of the crimes I hope to fasten upon him," nodded Klam, with a vicious glitter in his little eyes. "I chose that because it would hold him the more certainly—if ever I can get him out of this hot-bed of—*Ahem!*"

Even in his rage and hatred he could not entirely lose sight of prudence, but Madam Kate did not appear to notice his awkward slip.

Her eyes were turned to the floor, her hands lay in her lap, the long, white fingers working restlessly. The rich color had faded from her cheeks, leaving her face as white as that of a marble statue.

Riata Rob a murderer! That handsome boy? The glorious man to whom she had all unasked given her passionate love?

That abrupt break in Gunter's voice served to arouse Widow Kate from the spell which had fallen over her, and, with the color leaping back into her cheeks, and the brilliant light into her eyes, she forced a low laugh, yawning behind a hand that raised to hide it.

"Sure, I was nearly falling asleep—asking your pardon, Mr. Klam, dear! I've been riding since sunrise, and— But you were saying that Riata Rob had done something to put the law at his heels. I'm thinking?"

"Just knifing a man, that's all," grinned the wounded pursuer.

"Tell me about it, please," settling herself as one might who expects to hear a pleasant narra-

tive. "Remember, you and I are joining hands in this bit of a job, Mr. Klam, and the more I know the better I'll be able to aid you and help keep your secret."

"It isn't so much to tell, but *proving* it will be plenty enough to fit that proud neck with a noose! Rob Runnover killed a man over a game of cards down in El Paso."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"A little over a year ago; one year last month; on the 14th, to get down to exact figures."

"Nothing like being accurate in business matters," nodded the widow, in approval. "The time fits in well enough. The young man was away from home at about that time, I remember me, now. But hasn't it taken you a terribly long while to follow him up?"

"Not so long that his bloody crime has been forgotten, be sure!" with that vicious flash coming back into his little, ferret-like eyes. "But it wasn't through lack of searching for the criminal. We all hit off the wrong trail, and it led us a merry dance far over the line and through Mexico. You see, the way of it was like this: Robert Runnover looks more like a Spaniard than he does like a white man—"

"Barring the Irish-gray eyes of him!" nodded the widow.

"Those eyes helped to knot the rope for his neck, by the way," as he showed his teeth. "It was one of the most positive marks by which the criminal was remembered by the friends of the man he cut; gray eyes form such a strong contrast to his jet-black hair and swarthy skin."

"You know him well, I see."

"To my sorrow, yes! But that don't count. I started to tell you *why* we were led astray, and in part that was caused by his passing in El Paso and other border towns for a Mexican; Ruperto Ramon, he called himself there."

"The same initials, d'ye mind, now?"

"The same man from top to toe, too. I saw him then, and I saw him again this very evening when—"

"When you were lying in ambush waiting for him to come within reach of your gun?" coolly interposed Madam Kate, keenly watching the face of her patient.

"Why not, when I intended to take him alive? I knew that was my only chance. With his cowboys around him I'd stand mighty poor show of taking even my own self off!"

"Then Riata Rob really shot you?"

"He really did! I recognized him, and called to him. He fired on the instant, and hit me over the heart. I fell, and he came up, to draw back with a curse as he recognized my face. He shot again, meaning to bore my brain, then turned and rode away. I fired in that direction, but missed him. You heard my shots and came up. The rest you know."

Klam ceased speaking, lying back pale and exhausted. Widow Kate sat in silence for a few minutes, staring vacantly at the floor. Then she sprung to her feet, speaking rapidly:

"Your story *may* be true, but it sounds like a lie! Still, I can't afford to lose the sports, or the dance to follow; and until after *that* has passed, you must lie in hiding here, with a tight seal over your lips. If not—if you dare to cut up rusty, I'll knot the rope that shall hang you for a horse-thief caught in the act, with my own hands!"

CHAPTER X.

A DREAM THAT WAS NOT ALL A DREAM.

RECKLESS of all that might threaten himself, Riata Rob sprang to the window and flung it up, thrusting his head through the opening and flashing fiery glances back and forth over all the field his vision could cover; but, without sighting aught, ghost or mortal.

Startled by that wild cry, a cowboy or two came rushing to the room, and Rob bade them search outside, adding sharply:

"Bring in any and every stranger, if you have to bring them dead! Shoot to kill if hands don't go up the instant you challenge!"

He turned to his father, who was shivering in his seat, his sinewy frame relaxed, his head bowed and his face covered.

"What was it, father? You saw a face, but of course it *couldn't* have been the face of my dead mother!"

With a desperate effort the haunted rancher lifted his head, forcing a ghastly smile to his face as he spoke in husky notes:

"I was—my head got it worse than I thought, must be! Tell the boys—a little joke—"

"Father, can't you trust me?"

"Not now—to-morrow—I'm going to bed and to sleep," irritably muttered Jason Runnover, pushing that kindly hand from his arm and turning his face away from those keen if loving eyes.

Riata turned toward the window, pistol in hand, watching and listening. He could catch sight of hurrying figures under the starlight, but he recognized them as belonging to the ranch, and neither challenge nor shot rung out to relieve the intense strain which was upon his nerves.

"Shut the window and come away, Robert!" pettishly cried his father, a shiver in his voice

as in his tall figure, now upright and moving toward the bed. "I'm a bit cold. And sleepy, too! Will you do as I bid you, Robert?"

In silence Riata obeyed, drawing the dark curtain close before leaving the window.

"Go tell the boys there's naught to hunt for, lad," more naturally added the ranchero. "It was only a mad fancy. I must have fallen on my head when Cruiser unloaded me, but I'm all right now. Good-night, lad."

"I'm going to sit by your bed until you drop asleep, father."

"Devil a bit you will!" snapped Runnover, now indeed looking and talking like his usual self. "Am I a sucking babe? And you bound to defend the championship to-morrow?"

"Curse the championship!"

"Amen—after it is fairly won again," grimly laughed the old man, but without shifting the stand he had taken.

And in the end he had his way, Riata reluctantly yielding and leaving him alone for the night.

It was late before Rob even thought of rest or going to sleep, for he joined the cowboys in their vain search for the owner of the face which had so startled the ranch-owner. And when even the dogs failed to pick up the scent of a stranger, he gave over the search, at last convinced that it had all been but the vision of a shaken brain.

Twice he stole on velvet feet to the threshold beyond which his father lay sleeping; quietly and peacefully, as he could see through the keyhole in the door, thanks to the light which Jason Runnover kept burning brightly on the little table near his bedside.

"Something's gone crooked, but what? I never knew him to burn a light in his room before!"

It was easy to ask the question, but the answer was not forthcoming. And either that riddle, or something to the full as powerful, kept Rob rolling and tossing sleeplessly on his bed until long after the turn of night.

Still he was astir bright and early in the morning of that fated-to-be-eventful day, but found Jason Runnover afoot before him, looking bright and cheerful, altogether like his usual self when all was going well with him.

"Morning to you, five-times champion!" briskly cried the grim old ranchero, smiling easily under that keen, anxious gaze. "Grub is waiting your teeth, lad, for there's plenty to do this long day!"

"And you, father?"

"Bright as a dollar and lively as a cricket," was the quick response. "Only for the looks of the thing, I'd rub out your name and put down my own as champion of Run-over Ranch. Only— Well, I'd have to break more heads than lances, for I'd surely crown Widow Kate as my choice for queen of the festival. And that—"

"You promised to tell me what happened last night, father."

"Business first, and I'm sharp-set as a cross-cut saw this morning," curtly nodded the elder Runnover, leading the way to the table.

Riata understood that dogged squaring of those iron jaws, and knowing that he could not hope to win a word further on that puzzling question until Jason Runnover felt in the right mood, he gave way, eating like one who knows there is a day of hard work before him.

The old ranchero talked briskly through the meal, seemingly in an unusually agreeable humor for one of his grim, almost saturnine nature, but not once did he even approach the strange home-coming of the past evening.

He ordered their horses saddled and brought to the door, and in a few minutes more father and son were riding away from Run-over Ranch, heading toward the scene of the coming festivities.

"Isn't it almost time that I was hearing what happened to you yesterday, father?" Rob at length asked, a bit impatiently.

"Shortly; don't bother me just now, boy," was curtly replied.

He seemed to be following a trail, and such was the fact, though it was one drawn through his memory rather than printed upon earth; for he could recall but little of that wild, headlong race for the ranch, and was not positive he could find the precise spot where that strange experience of his had begun.

"Here we are, by glory!" he cried, at length, abruptly drawing rein and springing from the saddle. "Look!" as he pointed out a slight depression to one side of plain hoof-marks. "Right here I came out of the saddle, to make a hole in the ground with my blessed head and shoulders!"

"Then you were actually roped, father?" ejaculated Riata, his gray eyes catching a steely gleam as they swept around.

"That's what I want to find out," grimly declared the ranchero, as he bent low and began circling the ground. "Look for a trail, horse or foot."

Both father and son searched for a trail, and two pair of keener eyes the whole country could not boast; but only to come together again by that little dent in the soil, baffled.

"That settles it, Robert," decided his father,

"I must have had a stroke, and just dreamed all that I thought followed."

"But you were robbed!"

"I thought so when I told you, last night, but I lied without knowing it," laughed the ranchero, slipping a leather book from his breast, then shoving it back again. "I found this on my bed, after you went away. Reckon it dropped out when the lads carried me in."

"But—mother's face at the window?" hesitated Riata Rob, still far from satisfied with this prosaic explanation.

Jason Runnover turned abruptly away to where his horse stood, saying nothing until he was once more seated in the saddle.

"Part of the same ugly dream, of course; and only babes or idiots talk of dreams in the broad sunlight!" he said, harshly. "Go on to the grounds, Robert. I have to ride back to the ranch, but I'll be there in time to witness your five-fold victory, never fear!"

"I don't like to leave you like this, father!" hesitatingly.

"Go, I tell you!" in stern notes, his eyes flashing. "Do you want those fools to whisper abroad that Robert Runnover—my son!—is a coward? Go! Down that fool, Felix Parry, who has been boasting that he had a dead moral cinch on the medal this bout! Bah! 'tis a bad breed, and he's the poorest of them all!"

"He will be my brother inside of a week, remember, father!"

"But no son of my loins, thank Heaven!" snapped Jason, motioning Rob away, as he wheeled Cruiser and headed back toward Run-over Ranch.

But he maintained this course only until Riata was out of eye-range; then he veered sharply to the left, heading for the not very distant river.

Lightly as he had spoken that morning in the face of his son, Jason Runnover had roused up that morning with a firmer faith in his "dream" than ever, and though their utter failure to detect even the suspicion of a trail near the spot where he had first lost his senses the day before, had slightly shaken his belief that he had been made the subject of a hideous practical joke by bitter enemies, he was doggedly resolved to follow out the possible clew of which he had thought before falling asleep last night.

"That dull roaring must have been the river near the rapids," he mused, as he made his way toward that stream. "That jibes with the hole in the bank, too! It must be—I couldn't have dreamed it all out so clearly."

Cruiser carried his master rapidly to the high bank of the river, here cutting through a considerable rise of the ground, rippling noiselessly over and amidst the thickly-laying bowlders in a score of miniature falls; but now that he was near the spot where he might put his suspicions to the test, Jason Runnover hesitated.

His sinewy frame was shaken by a cold shiver, and his face grew as white as the liberal coating of bronze would permit. And, as he gazed up and down the river, a haunted look came into his eyes, for back came the memory of that awfully beautiful face—the face of his lost wife—floating from out the gloom into the clear moonlight!

"If I could have seen it—really seen it—at the time!" he muttered, hoarsely, brushing the cold drops from his brow with unsteady fingers. "But I hunted in vain—and I never knew for sure that the cruel waters had swallowed her up—I only knew that she was gone!"

He drew a pocket-flask and emptied it at a draught, though usually most temperate in his drinking. And then, as though fearing to linger longer, he began clambering down the steep bank, following what might have been likened to a precarious trail, though the flinty rocks showed no signs of frequent or recent usage for that purpose.

Still, he knew that, half-way down the precipitous bank, a small den or cave was to be found in the rocky wall, and some instinct told him that, by visiting this lonely place, he might gain some clew to the perplexing mystery of the past evening.

Just what he expected to discover Runnover could not have told himself. Enough that he felt impelled to explore that cave, and had come fully prepared for that purpose.

He paused at the vine-masked entrance, peering breathlessly into the hole, but seeing only darkness to reward him. He let the vines fall behind him, striking a match and lighting a candle-end which he had brought from the ranch for that purpose. And, until the wick burned freely, he studiously kept his eyes lowered.

He drew a quick breath of disappointment as he swept the little cavern with eager gaze. He could not have explained just what he expected to see, but, certainly, not this: an utter blank!

Was it? With a sharp catching of his breath he sprang forward to scan a blackened spot on the rocks. It was fresh, as his touch gave evidence, and with another cry he caught up a lace scarf, which he had seen about the throat of that floating vision—which he knew at once had years ago belonged to his wife!

"Wife—Dolores—forgive!" he gasped, falling heavily forward.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW FELIX PARRY CAME TO GRIEF.

A PRETTIER stretch of ground for that particular variety of sport could hardly have been picked out in all the vast expanse of Texas, and what nature had been unable to supply, nimble and willing hands had amply provided.

For the most part the pens, corrals, chutes and other devices were such as the finishing business of the grand "round-up" called for, but at least a portion of these had been built with an eye to the athletic sports which, according to custom, had one entire day devoted to their exercises.

At this centrally-located point by far the greater part of the marking, branding and final sorting of cattle had been done, though, of course, the different interests and widely-separated sections of that immense range had rendered other stations necessary.

But all that rough and dangerous work was at an end for another half-year, and all else was forgotten in the no less exciting and hardly less perilous "play" which remained to be carried out.

Many of the people living most remote from the chosen grounds had passed the night there, the men camping out, their "women-folk" finding accommodation at the most convenient ranch-house, and with the earliest crack of day the gathering began until, long before noon, nearly every man, woman and child for scores of miles around was on hand.

Only those who have been fortunate enough to attend and participate in just such a gathering can form any adequate idea of what it means or is like, and though a particular account of the whole, entering into details, would be well worth reading, after all such a record could convey but an imperfect picture to the uninitiated.

There were exercises arranged at almost every kind of riding and rope work, with both general and private prizes offered for the most proficient at each; nothing very rare or costly, to be sure, but all the more vigorously contested for on that account, perhaps. Victory was the main prize, with "beauty and chivalry" looking on and only waiting to lend their cordial applause.

Other prizes were offered from the general contribution for shooting with both rifle and revolver, in almost every style, the preference being given to practical, every-day work, such as might at any time be called for on the range, the drive, or in time of "rustling."

The programme was long, and began at an early hour, since each and every event lacked nothing for entries, and long before the indulgent sun crept across the meridian, numerous contests had been decided and ribbons and rosettes of different hues and shapes were plentifully scattered through the gathering, each one denoting a proud victor in one or another specialty.

For the most part these prizes had been won with rifle or revolver—the pistol proper being an unknown quantity "on the range"—for it was only just that steadiness of nerve should be rewarded when at its best, and before shaken by the more violent exercises of the day.

Nearly all of those whose acquaintance we have made thus far were present, and gayest, brightest, most noticeable of all was the dashing young widow, Mrs. Kate Malin.

Here, there, everywhere, on foot or in the saddle, just according to how the particular sport in hand might best be observed, flashed Widow Kate, and a goodly supply of those flaunting ribbons came from her own liberal hand.

"Sure, if one color is good, two is better, and I'd like to see the brave boy that would be ashamed to wear a bit o' Kate Malin's own choosing—so I would, now, man, dear!" she laughed, and went on setting in a flutter far more hearts than even she could hope to quiet again.

More than one of her favors went to console the defeated aspirants, and many a sly joke was broken when it was noticed that in every case the happy mortal so selected was favored beyond his brethren in face or in person.

"Why not, sure?" echoed Widow Kate, nothing abashed. "Must an ould woman like me be ashamed to say—what ivery wan o' ye be thinkin' in the sly heart o' ye, girlsens!—that I love a trim, well-built, handsome lad better nor an ugly? An' me in the market these long twinty months—nearly wan-an'-twinty, faith!"

Only Widow Kate could have spoken and acted so audaciously without paying the penalty, but all knew and loved her—even the women. And not one of them all, as they laughed at her wild sallies or applauded her quaint quips and quirks, even dreamed that below that gay and sparkling surface throbbed a sore and aching heart.

Least of all did Sybil Parry dream of the truth while in company with Riata Rob; and if the young ranchero himself suspected aught, he sure be permitted nothing of it all to show in face or tone as he replied to the laughing amazon whenever she passed nigh.

Felix Parry also was noticeable among the crowd, his handsome face flushed, his blonde curls flying in the breeze, drawing more than

one pair of longing eyes after him as he passed here and there.

The shorter, broader, more compact figure of the stranger from "down country," Owen Taylor, was almost invariably to be seen by his side, forming a strong contrast in almost every respect. Cool, suave, never losing that fixed smile no matter the company in which he found himself, showing remarkably steady nerves and true eyesight whenever he entered any of the minor sports, never once failing to find a place, and on all but two occasions taking first honors.

"The best shot with big gun or little on the grounds!" cried Felix Parry, after one of these exhibitions. "Money says that my pard can down any and all at such fine work!"

"Steady, pard," laughed Taylor, slipping a hand through the arm of his enthusiastic champion, leading him out of the crowd as he added: "It's well enough for sport, but I lose my nerves when a dollar is hung up before the target. No matches for me, I beg of you, pard."

There came a temporary cessation of sport when the noon hour came around, and with appetites sharpened by the work thus far performed or witnessed, the company gathered in family or friendly groups, picnic-fashion, for dinner.

After dinner was to come the main event of the day: the riding for the Range Championship; in which everybody was deeply interested for one reason or another.

For one thing, each ranch represented in the general round-up was entitled to one named champion, on whose skill and address their claims for at least six months must depend.

The rules of the contest for the championship were plain and simple, requiring no studying on the part of those more deeply interested, yet it may be just as well to give a synopsis of them in this place.

Each representative was entitled to a single run, barring outside interference, and while rapidity was to be the main point, neatness and address were both to be considered in awarding the medal which carried with it the title of Range Champion.

The judges were to turn loose the first bull or steer, the animal to be selected before the order of running was decided by drawing lots, one for each man entered. The first man running to choose an animal for the second aspirant; after that, he whose time was lowest had the privilege of picking a steer or bull for the man to follow.

Each contestant in turn was to take his stand by the score, saddle and bridle lying by his feet, holding his chosen horse. At the word the steer was to be set free, the champion was to saddle and bridle, mount and chase, lasso and throw his steer, then alight and securely tie its four legs together, time being taken from start to finish, and he who performed the feat in the quickest time to be declared champion; unless some among the contestants cared to still further put his claim to the test, in the manner provided for by the following rules.

Passing over that point for the time being, we will only add that in drawing names to decide the order of running, the champion of the past meeting was always excepted; to him belonged the doubtful honor of having to run against the best time made by all who went before.

With so much still to decide, hunger was quickly appeased, and all prepared for the main event of the day.

Betting was brisk, and by no means confined strictly to the sterner sex; but as a rule Riata Rob was barred. Even those who had pet representatives entered for the championship seemed to feel that, barring accident, the Run-over champion had a "dead moral cinch" on the medal.

Two courses were run, in respectable time enough, though in hardly championship form, as even their most enthusiastic friends were willing to admit. But it was a good beginning, and if the best was kept to the last, all would enjoy the feast provided so much the better.

Fate decided that Felix Parry, representative of the Good Luck Ranch, should come third on the roll, though he had feverishly longed for a position much lower on the list; for dearly as he coveted the honor of bearing of the title, he even more deeply thirsted to lower the colors of Riata Rob Runnover in the dust.

Riata Rob took undisguised interest in this trial, though many who noted his pale face and glittering eyes read his motives wrongly; he had no fears of losing the record through Felix Parry, but he did fear the young man's safety.

Felix had been drinking too freely for one who needed a clear brain and ready wits, joined to nimble feet and trained hands. Not that he was drunk; far from it; but there was far more fire in his blood and brain than a man should have for such trying work.

The signal was sounded, and as the bars fell, a gaunt, red-eyed, fierce-looking brindle steer shot out and took to its heels with a savage bellow.

With marvelous rapidity, such as none but a practical cowboy could emulate or even believe, Felix flung on saddle and bridle, seeming to secure them by magic rather than by hand-

work, then vaulted into the saddle while his good horse was springing away in hot pursuit of the fleeing steer.

A cheer followed the Good Luck champion, for so far no man living could have bettered his work, and if all the rest went on as smoothly, the existing record would be crowded if not wiped out, and a worthy task set for the final winner.

Although a thoroughbred, Felix Parry's present mount had been carefully trained for the work, and nobly performed the part allotted it, all the better for his speed and breeding.

Still in marvelously fast time the steer was overhauled, and at the first cast its wide-spreading horns were encircled by the noose.

Instantly the thoroughbred halted, with a half-turn, bracing itself for the inevitable shock; but Felix did not wait for that.

The instant he made his cast he leaped clear of the saddle, striking like a cat on his feet, shorter ropes clutched in his hand, taken from his belt even while in mid-air. For if aught should happen to cause his noose to fail of its work, he knew that he would have no time to gather up and coil the lasso for another.

A sharp cry parted his lips as he saw the steer pitch headlong and lie half-stunned with the shock. Then he was upon the brute, looping a rope about both hind-feet to—

With a sharp twang his tightly-strained lasso parted nearly midway, the snaky coils shooting forward to strike and tangle up his legs!

With a savage cry he tried to leap aside, only to trip and fall heavily, while the maddened steer, bellowing viciously, kicked off the loop and scrambled to its feet. Not to resume its flight, but to turn and plunge viciously at the fallen man, hampered by the faithless lasso!

CHAPTER XII.

THE TARANTULA'S CHAMPION.

PALE and agitated, Sybil Parry was watching her brother, and when she saw him fall—when she saw the maddened steer turn and plunge forward with armed front lowered—a cry of fear and despair broke from her lips, and reeling in the saddle, she covered her eyes with trembling hands to shut out the awful vision.

For a frightful death seemed inevitable to nearly all who were appalled witnesses of that unexpected accident.

So it seemed to Felix Parry himself, for the broken lasso still tangled his feet, and those terrible horns were almost touching his person as he instinctively flung up his hands.

His fingers closed on either horn with a death-grip, just in time to save his breast from being impaled by one of the polished weapons; for with an angry snort the steer flung up its head to shake off that weight, thus swinging the young man in a line with its own fierce rush.

This brought Felix directly between those wide-branching horns, and when the steer made its second thrust, one passed on each side of his body, tearing only the hard earth, though the head itself seemed crushing in his breast-bone.

Another savage toss, and the luckless young man's hold was broken as the breath left him under that horrible pressure. And bellowing with increased ferocity, the steer lowered its horns for a second charge upon its now helpless antagonist.

Then—swift as a swallow on the wing came Riata Rob, leaping from the saddle as his good horse dashed by, grasping with one hand and striking with the other at the same instant.

The broad, keen blade sunk half-way to its hilt just back of the horns, severing the spinal cord and killing the brindle steer as swiftly as could lightning bolt itself. And the hand that clutched a horn gave a mighty jerk that overturned the animal, causing it to fall clear of Felix, though so doing brought an ugly tumble upon himself.

Oh, what wild cheers went up from the throats of those who witnessed that rescue! And how Widow Kate laughed and cried at the same time as she—jealousy forgotten for the moment—supported and hugged and kissed Sybil Parry all at the same time!

Quick as a cat, Riata Rob was upon his feet none the worse for his tumble, barring a hit of dust and a few goutts of blood. A glance showed him that Felix Parry was not seriously injured, in body, at least, and deftly removing the tangled lariat, he held out a hand to assist his prospective brother-in-law to arise.

"Curse ye!" gasped Felix, fairly livid with rage and mortification combined, striking viciously at the proffered hand. "What made you—chip in?"

Stung to the quick despite himself, Riata Rob turned sharply away, calling to his horse, mounting as Prince came trotting up, then riding off in the direction of the crowd, which was now surging forward.

He received their congratulations coldly, almost angrily, for the conduct of Felix had soured his hot temper for the time being. He joined Sybil, because he could not avoid doing so without positive rudeness, though he never felt less like being thanked than just then.

For a time all was confusion, and Felix Parry kept matters at a boiling pitch, seeming fairly beside himself. He claimed foul play in regard

to his lasso, and when this was proven without just foundation, the severed ends being examined and plainly showing the borings of a tiny worm, the workings of which could be noted only on the inside of the plaited hide, he loudly denounced Riata Rob for having interfered without good cause.

"I could have thrown and tied the beast, easy enough! I've got money that says so! Money talks, and—"

He stopped abruptly as Riata Rob, pale, bright-eyed, a peculiarly pinched look about his fine-cut nostrils, pressed through the crowd and holding out a hand, spoke quickly:

"I beg your pardon for interfering, Mr. Parry. I lost my head for the moment, or—"

"I haven't lost any hand, Rob Run-over!" rudely interjected Felix, as he turned away without touching the proffered member.

A little murmur of indignation and reproof ran around the gathering at this marked insult, but Riata Rob forced a smile, though his fingers clinched tightly as his hand dropped. And his tones were even and natural as he turned to one of the elected judges hard by, to say:

"I admit my fault, sir, and ask that Mr. Parry may be granted another run in the name of fair play. And I am ready to stand any penalty for my interference which you may see fit to impose."

No one knew better than he what penalty must be imposed, if any, but just then he would have himself chosen debarment. The medal that glittered on his bosom seemed to scorch him to the very heart, and he turned sick at thought of joining further in the sports of the day.

"I protest, judge!" rung out the sharp tones of Jason Runnover. "Parry had already lost his chance by over-time, and though my lad was a donkey for chipping in as he did, I leave it to the crowd if his so doing in one single iota injured that hot-head's chances of winning!"

"No penalty! Riata Rob forever!"

"Stick to the rules—give him another chance!"

Sharp and excited cries came from two different factions, though it was clearly to be seen that by far the greater portion were in favor of the Run-over champion. But before the affair could go further than hot words, Felix Parry himself cut the knot.

"I'll take no favor that comes through his asking!" he angrily cried. "I withdraw my claim. Let him go his way—I'll even up with him before either of our heads turn gray!"

Riata Rob turned with a short cry, and instinctively the crowd divided, falling back on either hand and leaving the two young men confronting each other.

Felix Parry, flushed with rage and chagrin, an ugly devil filling his big blue eyes, dropped a hand to his belt as though to draw, but Riata Rob forced a smile as he again held out the hand of friendship.

"I own my fault, and once more ask your pardon, Parry. I didn't stop to think—I only saw and heard your sister crying out in terror at your peril."

"I could have thrown and tied the brute!"

"I see that now, but I didn't at the time. Come, man, don't hold a grudge where one is hardly deserved. I'll give up my chance, since you have lost yours through my fault. I'd offer it to you if—"

"Thank you for nothing, Rob Run-over!" growled Felix, turning away without touching that hand, joining Owen Taylor, who was standing a little apart, a curious smile lighting up his strong face.

"Let the sulky cub go gnaw his nails in secret, lad!" cried grim Jason Runnover, joining his son and locking arms. "I always stood up for it that there was an out-cross to the breed, and right there you see a living proof that I was right!"

Riata Rob led his father apart from the crowd, and managed to win from him a promise that he would say or do nothing that could increase the present hard feeling. But in turn he had to pledge himself to do all that lay in his power to carry off the medal once more.

Getting rid of his father, all the more easily that the next aspirant for championship honors had been called to the mark, Riata Rob soon joined Sybil, both drawing apart where they might talk without being annoyed by sharp and curious ears.

No need to relate how the girl strove to express her thanks for the great service he had rendered in preserving her brother from a horrible death, or how she strove to chase the gloomy shadows from his pale brow.

He was grateful to her for this, and showed it in his eloquent eyes since more positive demonstration was forbidden by the crowd of which they formed a minute portion. But his face remained cold and stern, his brows contracted.

"Luck keeps going against me, Sybil," he said, gloomily, after he had watched the trials in silence for some little time, neither appearing to take any interest in the matter after what had transpired. "I wanted to win back his respect, if not his affection, and now—I've only gained his still more bitter hatred!"

"You saved his life, and—"

Riata Rob cut her low speech short with a hard laugh.

"That's where the saddle galls, don't you see? A man would far rather meet death than have his life saved in such a manner before a crowd like this! I knew it all the time, but what could I do? He was your brother!"

"It was nobly done! The crowd went fairly wild to see it!"

"And each cheer cut him deeper than those horns could have plunged! I knew how it would be. And if he hadn't been your brother, I'd have stood by without lifting a finger—just as I would have prayed others to stand by if I had been in his place."

Sybil knew not what to say after that, and in silence they watched the game go on, one after another champion running his course to meet with disappointment if he failed to top the record of the day, or to flush with dear triumph when the ringing cheers told him he now stood first on the list.

The afternoon was well-spent when Sybil uttered a low exclamation, pointing out the compact figure of Owen Taylor, garbed as though for work, putting a big black horse through its paces far beyond the lists set apart for the running.

"Look! that evil creature!" she said, with a troubled frown.

Riata Rob smiled coldly, showing his teeth a bit before replying:

"Yes; you told me as much, I believe. He is to ride as the Tarantula's champion."

In silence they watched Owen Taylor perform, like one who was to ride a strange horse, but with whose paces and peculiarities he hoped to grow acquainted before the trying moment should arrive. And as they gazed, both sweetheart and lover were forced to admit that, if nothing else, Owen Taylor was an admirable horseman.

Yet there was nothing ostentatious about his actions. A slight rise in the ground concealed him from nearly all of the gathering, and had they not have drawn quite a ways apart from the others, he might even have escaped the notice of the lovers as well.

"Yes, the fellow understands a horse, but that isn't all; it's the man himself that counts most in a bit of work like this," muttered Rob, nodding toward the lists, where another champion had tasted the bitterness of defeat in his battle with the scythe-bearer.

"The Tarantula on deck!" cried the judge, in stentorian tones, and catching the summons, Owen Taylor trotted the big black leisurely to the score, alighting and removing both saddle and bridle, standing alert and ready for the signal.

This was not long delayed, and the instant the bars were let down and the chosen animal goaded out into the opening, Owen Taylor slipped bridle in place and clapped on the saddle, drawing the girth tight with remarkable rapidity; for, of course, where so much depends on a single second of time, the regular cinch-straps are not required to be used.

He showed great skill and activity, but then, too, everything seemed to favor him instead of working against his chances. The steer, strong and active enough, sulked, refusing to run, and was thrown hardly a hundred yards away from the pen out of which it had been goaded.

The big black played its part to perfection, and Taylor handled the steer as though it had been but an overgrown calf, tying its legs without the slightest trouble, then casting off his lasso from its horns, lifting a hand in token that his work was done.

Amid wildest cheers, for—the State record had been broken!

CHAPTER XIII.

"YOU MUST BEAT THAT FELLOW!"

RIATA ROB joined in that cheer, but it was far from hearty, and the notes seemed to stick in his throat.

Not that he was of a particularly envious disposition, or that he felt fearful of losing the right to wear longer the bright medal now pinned to his breast. Had Felix Parry been the lucky man to call forth that wildly-repeated record, no single throat would have come nearer splitting wide in its enthusiastic yelling than that of Robert Runnover. Or had the record been made by any other on the list—any one save Taylor!—Owen Taylor!

"Oh, Rob—that wretch!" almost sobbed Sybil, her chagrin and disappointment far too strong for utterance in words.

Before Rob could say aught in answer, a somewhat portly man rode quickly up to the couple, his face showing strong excitement as he exclaimed:

"How d'y' like that, Runnover? Glorious time—but who'd 'a' thought it of the sly rascal? And he to go on the quiet and buy the right to represent the Tarantula Ranch!"

"But, papa—"

"He did his work very neatly, Mr. Parry, and no doubt fully deserves all that luck has bestowed upon him," quietly replied Riata Rob.

"Luck? Oh, yes, you mean the steer," nod-

ded the portly ranchero, after a swift glance into the face of his daughter's lover. "Yes, Taylor was favored a bit in that quarter, but even a tail-on-end wouldn't have pulled his flag down. Glorious, sir! Can't help it if it does rub out your mark, Runnover!"

It was very seldom that Arnold Parry grew excited enough to make a public exhibition of himself. As a rule he was slow, pompous or dignified, just according to whether the one judging was his friend or his enemy, and a little apt to appear somewhat pedantic through his habit of slow speech and careful selection of his words.

All that was gone or forgotten now. The electricity with which the entire crowd was permeated also affected Arnold Parry, and his face glowed, his eyes sparkled, his tongue ran nimbly as though a score heavy years had been lifted from his shoulders.

Up to now all had seemed the wildest confusion, though he who had been the prime means of calling those enthusiastic yells forth looked and acted the coolest of the cool.

Having made his claim of time, and seen it accepted, Owen Taylor deftly removed the hoppers from about the legs of his steer, giving a sharp cry that brought the big black horse a few paces nearer, thus slackening that sturdy strain and enabling Taylor to cast off the lasso from about the steer's horns.

He sprung nimbly back as he did this, for the animal scrambled to its feet with a hoarse bellow, and such horns as its front could boast were ugly weapons for a footman to face. But instead of charging, the steer fled blindly away over the plain, bellowing like a terrified calf.

Owen Taylor called to the black horse, leaping into the saddle as the well-trained animal came trotting up, deftly recoiling his lariat the while. And not until this was done did the stranger seem to notice the wild cheers being lifted in his honor.

He cast a quick glance over the company, then lifted his hat and bowed easily, that never-fading smile still beaming on his face.

"Holy smoke and scorching cinders!" fairly howled Felix Parry, casting his broad-brimmed hat high into the air, seemingly fairly insane with joy at the fine showing his lately-made friend had put on record. "Two to one that the Tarantula's champion takes the cake!"

"I'm your man, Pretty Goldenlocks, while there's a bar of the Gridiron left!" cried Widow Kate Malin, crowding her horse forward with gloved hand stretched out to clinch the bargain. "What matter if I go to the poorhouse, so long as I take the trip through standing up for home talent, sure?"

Felix Parry turned pale, then flushed up hotly at this too prompt acceptance of his bold challenge, but he made the best of a bad matter.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Malin, and crave your mercy," he said, with a forced smile on his really handsome face as he bowed low before the dashing young widow.

"Two to one, ye said, Parry, and let it be in money, marbles or chalk; sure, man, dear, I can win soft words a-plenty without putting up solid collateral as weight against wind!"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Malin, but it's a sacred rule with me never to bet with a lady unless I'm dead sure she'll win."

"Will ye hear to that now!" cried Widow Kate, lifting her hands in a gesture of mock despair. "Talk of woman's rights—sure, niver a right at all that goes wid the petticoats but what it's a burning wrong, faith!"

"Then the say-so passes round to me, and I'm not wearing skirts to a dangerous extent," cried Jason Runnover, his gaunt visage fairly aglow as he pressed nearer to where young Parry stood. "No man shall ever have it to brag that I took odds against my own flesh and blood, but I'll lay you evens, horn for horn and hoof for hoof, up to ten thousand if you like, that the Tarantula doesn't carry off the medal!"

"You're just the customer I was hunting, Run-over!" laughed Felix Parry, his flushed face turning pale but his eyes gleaming still more brightly than ever as he also crowded forward.

But that meeting was not to take place just then, nor just how the two excited bettors desired.

At the first cry of his excited son, Arnold Parry had moved in that direction, and Riata Rob gazed the same way, his face very pale, his eyes glittering under his contracting brows as he listened, for he knew that Felix Parry was aiming that shaft at him.

But when Widow Kate fell back in mock despair at the handicap placed upon her by Dame Nature in making her a woman instead of a man, and Jason Runnover pluckily rushed to the defense of his son, Riata Rob hastily bade Sybil await his return, then sprung from his horse and strode toward the now more than ever excited crowd.

Other voices were lifted high, a few favoring the Tarantula's representative and time, but by far the majority pluckily sticking by their four-times champion, all making such a wild confusion that none of the company could tell whether or no a wager had been accepted.

"One moment, gentlemen!" cried Riata Rob,

his clear, shrill notes seeming to still that tumult as by magic. "Don't any of you rush blindly into a speculation that may depend upon my work, or maybe you'll be losers without even a chance to win."

"Two to one on Tarantula against Run-over!" cried Felix, recklessly repeating his mad challenge, but Riata Rob paid not the slightest attention to him, one hand firmly closing on Jason Runnover's arm as he spoke out clearly and distinctly:

"Of course, gentlemen, I can't help outside betting, but I can and will punish all those who persist in putting up their wealth on my shoulders against my will. Draw all bets you have made—I'll make good what you may have to forfeit in so doing—and make no others depending on my trial, or I'll positively decline to ride at all!"

There was a dead silence following this bold speech for a few moments, but then it was broken by Felix Parry, crying out derisively:

"Cowed, and hunting water, by glory!" Riata Rob bowed coldly toward the reckless youth, saying:

"You are a privileged character to-day, Mr. Parry, but no other man living dare even hint what you have so recklessly asserted."

Instinctively many eyes were turned toward Owen Taylor, straight into whose face Riata Rob was gazing; but the man from "down-country" seemed innocent as a lamb, smiling—ever smiling blandly!

Riata Rob turned away with sneering lip, looking squarely into the grim face of his father, adding:

"Of course what I said includes you, sir."

"All right; shut goes my shop!" laughed the old ranchero. "And all the more readily because I wanted to bet on a dead-sure thing! If I didn't know that, gentlemen, you'd see me kicking like a bay steer!"

"That is all, gentlemen. No friend will mix my name in a bet against my will, and if an enemy does, he'll only publish his fears of a fair beating!"

Many of those present looked as though they would dearly like to change this determination of their pet champion, but something in that pale, stern face kept them from making any such attempt, and without interruption from any source, Riata Rob made his way back to the side of his bride-elect.

"Still the old luck, Sybil," he said, with a forced smile, as he regained the saddle and met her agitated gaze. "Felix is bent on making all the range acquainted with his objections to the man you have honored as your choice for a life-mate! But he sha'n't have it to say that through my means he left these grounds poorer than when he came upon them!"

"Felix is mad—or drunk!" frowned Sybil, biting her red lips in an effort to keep back the tears that tried to find exit. "I almost wish you had let your father crowd him to the wall! It would have served father right for not holding the silly boy better in hand!"

Riata Rob softened visibly, as well he might. Such perfect faith is rare enough even in a loving heart.

"The lesson might have fallen on the other side, little lady," he said, with a soft laugh, even while his eyes thanked her. "Taylor has set me a pretty mark; better time than I've ever been able to make before, you must bear in mind, Sybil."

"But you can beat it—you must beat that fellow, Robert!" impetuously cried the maiden, her sweet face flushing, her blue eyes seeming to fill with living fire as she leaned still nearer him. "I should die of mortification to see that brute carry off the medal that has been honored by lying over your heart—my lover!"

Again Riata Rob thanked her with his eyes. Too many keen-sighted people were about for him to do more than that, just then.

"You wish me to win, little woman, and with such backing I can hardly fail of success. And—Sybil," his voice betraying part of the hot passions raging beneath that calm exterior, "I'd rather die than fail before your sweet eyes!"

"You will not—I know it, Robert!"

"I think that way myself," resuming his former calm demeanor. "I didn't interfere because I thought of personal loss—for what is father's is mine, you know. I simply wished to save Felix from losing too heavily by backing his hatred rather than his better judgment."

"He is mad—he don't know what he is doing!"

"I lay it all to that Owen Taylor. Felix has never been the same man since he met up with that accursed blackleg from El Paso!"

"I know—and that is why I say you must beat him, Robert! Never mind what Felix may lose—never mind if it strips Good Luck bare to make his losses good—you must carry off the medal once more!"

"I will, but 'twill be the last time," nodded Riata Rob, with a darkening frown coming across his pale face. "But why do you hate this fellow so bitterly, Sybil?"

"Because he dared to—" impulsively began the maiden, only to break off abruptly as she caught that red glow coming into his eyes.

"Dared to made love to you, Sybil? Is that it?"

"That—and worse!"

"I'll kill the scoundrel before—"

But her hand was on his arm and he seemed unable to break away while those blue eyes bade him stay, though his blood seemed boiling in his veins and his eyes literally flashed fire.

CHAPTER XIV.

DUN DEVIL AND HIS MASTER.

"STOP, Robert, if you love me!" came pantingly from her pale lips, and as only one of his hot temperament could be won over through perfect love, his instant yielding proved very sweet to Sybil.

"Tell me what he has done, little woman, then," Riata Rob forced himself to say in even tones.

"Not here—not now," was the hurried response. "After the festival is over you shall hear everything."

"So be it, then. Let him run his rope until to-morrow."

Woman-like, Sybil glanced hurriedly around them to make sure no curious eyes had noticed their little drama, giving a start as she saw a man on foot, at no great distance, making furtive signals toward them, or else to some person beyond in the same line.

"Look at that man, Robert!" she hurriedly whispered, a cast of her blue eyes guiding those of her lover toward the footman. "Who is that fellow—friend or enemy?"

"A friend, and true as steel," was the quick response. "Billy Black, my favorite cowboy."

It was indeed the man whom Riata Rob had dispatched hot-foot in quest of Dr. John Beeman the evening before, after bringing such startling tidings from Run-over Ranch. Billy Black had failed in his quest, because the doctor was just then engaged at the Gridiron, but the faithful fellow had followed after, only to be met by the rider whom Riata Rob, under instructions from Jason Runoyer, had dispatched to countermand the order for medical assistance.

Just now Billy Black was engaged in trying to attract the notice of his young master, too bashful or too considerate to rudely intrude upon the lovers without due warning; and even when Riata Rob signed for him to advance, he did so hesitatingly, doffing his wide hat and holding it tightly clasped to his breast as he bowed and scraped a foot at each step that brought him nearer.

"An oddity in some respects," whispered Riata Rob to his lady love. "Bold as a lion where men alone are concerned, Billy would rather charge a tribe of Apaches single-handed than face a lady. Yet he fairly worships the ground his master's bride treads upon!"

More than enough to win a bright smile and kindly bow from Sybil Parry, and Billy Black almost howled with embarrassed delight when the beautiful maiden leaned over in her saddle to clasp his hand.

"You are *his* friend, Mr. Black, and that makes you mine," she said, cordially, then taking pity on the poor fellow, and drawing back a little to give the cowboy a chance to make his communication in private in case he should prefer it that way.

"What is it, Billy? You wished to tell me something?" asked Riata Rob, smiling as he gave the bewildered cowboy a much-needed cue.

"Sure I did, boss, but it clean jumped out o' the mind o' me when—devil fly away with me if water ever touches that hand ag'in!"

He gazed almost adoringly at the rather grimy paw which still tingled under the pressure Sybil had given it, then clapped it behind his back and flushing until his face was fairly purple as Sybil could not smother back her laugh of sudden amusement.

"I know just how you feel, Billy, and so does Miss Parry, for—"

"A truer compliment Miss Parry never received in all her life!" that young lady declared, making amends for that laugh by smiling brightly upon the embarrassed cowboy.

"If I laughed, 'twas because it made me proudly happy to feel that I had so good a friend where I never so much as suspected the fact before."

"I'd die fer ye, Miss Parry, an' so would many another honest lad that owns Run-over for a master!" earnestly declared Billy Black.

"Rather, live for me and—my future husband," said Sybil, blushing divinely, yet proving right well that she knew how to win and keep a friend for her lover's sake.

Was it instinct that warned her of the troubled times drawing so near them both? Certain it is that, just then, Sybil Parry felt that all true friends would be needed before many more hours should pass over their heads.

"Business, Billy Black!" nodded Riata Rob, warned of rapidly-flying time by the loud summons for another contestant to prepare for scoring. "What was it you wished to tell me?"

"Ef you wouldn't mind—ef the young lady was jest to 'scuse us both fer a weenty bit minnit or two, boss," hesitated the cowboy.

Fortunately Arnold Parry was just then no-

ticed clearing the crowd at the score, and Riata Rob caught Sybil's eye, mutely asking her to give him a little grace.

"I'll join papa, but—if it is fresh trouble, you'll tell me all, dear?" she whispered, hastily, so that only his ears could catch the troubled words.

"I'll keep nothing from you that you ought to hear, be sure, little woman," as hurriedly replied Riata Rob, while bearing her company to the new station which Arnold Parry had taken up, the better to watch the new course just about to be run.

Leaving her with her parent, Riata Rob returned to where Billy Black was awaiting him, and then the cowboy hastily muttered:

"It's a put-up job to down ye, boss! They've got Dun Devil in thar, holdin' him dark to spring onto ye when your time comes!"

The young rancher's face turned a bit paler, and an ugly glitter leaped into his eyes as he knew what those words meant, if wholly true. But never a word parted his lips as he rode up to the pens, dismounting and leaving his horse in charge of Billy Black.

He required no directions, for he saw among a little knot of men gathered near a private pen that was so closely boarded in as to resemble a box stall, the slender, golden-haired figure of Felix Parry.

The stall was just being opened, and the cowboy who did the work scaled the high fence in almost ludicrous haste as a stag-like steer came plunging into full sight, stopping and tossing its jet-black horns high into the air, cutting a narrow furrow along the stout plank not half a foot from the top over which the cowboy had flung himself.

"Tough lines for you, Riata Rob!" cried a friendly but uneasy voice close to his side. "That's Dun Devil, sure enough."

"How does that concern me? Dun Devil belongs to Good Luck."

"Did, but don't, worse luck! Parry sold him to the stranger from Paso. I saw the bill with my own two eyes."

"Looking at the belt-destroyer, Run-over?" cried Felix Parry, just then coming up, his face flushed with hopes of coming triumph.

"No, sir. Simply trying to separate my friends from my enemies," coldly retorted Riata Rob, turning away after a single swift glance into that liquor flushed countenance.

"You need make no mistake in my case, then," with a hard, ugly laugh that stung like the crack of a whip. "I'm on the other side, and all the world is welcome to my reasons, too!"

Riata Rob walked on as though he failed to catch either words or thinly-veiled meaning, but though his face was hard-set and showed nothing of the strong passions raging back of that marble exterior, he was inwardly vowing to win the race if it cost him every friend in the wide world.

"They's only one more turn, an' that don't count, boss," muttered Billy Black, an uneasy glitter in his eyes as he added: "I wasn't off, boss? It's really Dun Devil?"

Riata Rob nodded his head in grim silence as he busied himself about his saddle, meaning to run no unnecessary risks with so much hanging in the balance.

"Then it's what I reckoned: a put-up job! Boss?"

"Well, what is it now, Billy?"

"Dun Devil ain't g'wine to run! I'll let daylight clean through the p'izen critter, fu'st!"

"Try it, and I'll kill you, Billy," coldly said Riata Rob, but without even glancing around. "I'll down Dun Devil and his masters, both old and new."

Billy Black dared say no more, though he vainly strove to bring a confident grin to his face as the summons went forth for Champion Rob to make ready for scoring.

Hardly a whisper broke the painful silence as Riata Rob stood in waiting, for word of Dun Devil had gone through the crowd, and the evil reputation which that fierce creature had won through six years of outlawry—so to speak—seemed to make this a fight for life instead of a harmless tilt against time alone.

Many friends who had until now stood by Felix Parry, flocked to the other side, for though the letter of the law might have been kept, and through open purchase of Dun Devil Owen Taylor have the right to send him forth as a subject for the champion, the spirit had been broken beyond all doubt, solely for the purpose of "downing" Riata Rob.

Champion Rob nodded his head in token that he was ready. The bars were let down and Dun Devil plunged through the opening, only pausing to take one glance at the crowd, then tearing away from captivity with almost the swiftness of a stag who hears hounds upon its heels.

But—how was it done? Riata Rob was already in chase, Prince stretching out like a quarter-horse, the black coils of the lasso cutting the air as they circled once, twice, then shot out like a waving snake!

At the same time Riata Rob took a flying leap through the air, hardly seeming to touch the ground before he was rushing straight into

the cloud of dust torn loose and cast aloft on the air by Dun Devil as he turned end for end under that sudden check. And with noble Prince pulling back, keeping a tight strain upon the steer, Riata Rob grappled with those lunging legs, working as mortal man never worked before, tying them and drawing all together in a vicious knot!

Then—he sprung upon those shivering ribs, lifting his hand in token that his work was completed according to rule.

Then—all was still for a single breath.

Then—

"Time: *forty-eight and one-half seconds!*"

Harsh, unsteady from pure excitement and quivering with pride, the voice of the judge rung out, to be followed by utter silence.

Although all who witnessed that marvelous display felt that remarkably quick time had been made, not one among them all had dared put it as low as this. Not only was Owen Taylor's time wiped out—and until then his record had eclipsed anything the State had ever known—but this time surpassed anything any other State had placed on record.

And as this glorious fact was recognized, one mighty cheer went up in which nearly every throat joined—a cheer that actually seemed to send a tremor along the earth's surface itself!

A swift flush of color leaped into Riata Rob's face, but he hid it by bending over to cut the ropes that hampered Dun Devil, leaping nimbly aside as he whistled to Red Prince, leaving the loop still about the horns of the struggling steer.

Leaping into the saddle, Riata Rob permitted Dun Devil to flee, only guarding against his turning to charge the gathering. But for once Dun Devil had found his master, and only thought of flight, even when Riata Rob, at a safe distance from the crowd, sped alongside to twitch the loop from about its long horns.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TARANTULA CHAMPION STILL ON DECK.

WITH that official announcement of the time made by Riata Rob, the "agony was over," for what remained to be done was little more than a matter of form, as one pouting young lady declared.

"Of course he'll crown Syb. Parry, so what's the use?"

But custom was made to be observed, and the disappointed young lady was, with all the others of her sex, promptly marshaled in double lines, through which Riata Rob was forced to ride and publicly select the fair one who was to be known as "Queen of the Range" until the next semi-annual meeting, and pin to her breast the neat emblem of gold which she was to wear during the ball or dance with which the festival was to end, that same night.

His gray eyes glowing, his face wearing a slight flush, a smile playing about his lips, Riata Rob never looked handsomer in all his life than he did when he rode slowly through the double lines, one hand holding his hat, the other guarding the emblem as he flashed his bright glances from face to face, now to the right, then to the other hand.

"Ride ye further and fare ye worse, Robbie, lad!" audaciously cried Widow Kate as, after a bit of mock hesitation, the champion passed on. "It's luck that still clings to ye, sure, for the wan ye was batting that purthy eye at just thin would have to throw a better partner over to take ye—and it's my own saacret I'm exposing, faith!"

It was all part of the play, and though he was heartily sick of it for the time being, Riata Rob knew that any curtailment would win unfavorable comments, so he forced himself to carry it all out in style.

He affected to be in doubt, his mental acumen blinded by such an array of fair ones. He rode clear down the lines without making his choice, then wheeled his horse to retrace his steps. Finally he paused in front of Sybil, proudly flushed, her eyes still glittering with the reflection of her betrothed lover's victory. And as Riata Rob drew erect in his saddle once more, the golden horseshoe, crossed with whip and spur, swinging by a gold lasso, from an enamelled pin, which bore the proud title, glittered above the heart of the "Queen of the Range!"

It was all part of the play, and so were the ringing cheers that greeted the young couple as Sybil took her place beside Riata Rob, heading the procession that marched around the grounds. All part of the play, but it is uniting in just such genial sports that helps keep the heart from rusting out, where nothing better is afforded.

Both Sybil and Robert were glad when the ceremony was over, and they could leave their station of honor without fear of giving offense

*NOTE:—Lest the uninitiated reader may accuse the writer of unlawful exaggeration at this point, it may be as well to state that, on July 6, of the present year, at San Marcial, N. M., Harry Crawford, the 17-year-old son of the "Poet Scout," Captain Jack Crawford, caught, threw and tied a steer under like conditions, in just two seconds less than the time given Riata Rob: 46 1-2 seconds.—J. E. B., Jr.

to any of their friends. For, as may be guessed, neither felt in just the right humor for playing their royal parts properly.

No one had taken the victory of Riata Rob nearly so hardly as Felix Parry. His was the only voice that did not help to swell that enthusiastic cheer when the marvelous time was announced; even Owen Taylor had the good grace to lift his voice with the rest, smiling as though nothing half so agreeable could possibly have happened him; and while the crowd were pressing around to congratulate the champion on his fresh laurels, the angry young rancher was following after Dun Devil, Winchester in hand.

Immediately after the parade broke up, and while the women were looking after provisions for the lunch which custom said must follow the conclusion of the trials for the championship, men gathered in little knots, eagerly asking one another if any supplementary contests were to come off.

At neither meeting of the past year had any such occurred, for pretty nearly all concerned seemed to admit Riata Rob's supremacy at that particular species of sport. But nearly everybody now seemed to feel that the end had not yet come.

Never before had there been ill-feeling mingled with honest rivalry, but after the peculiar manner in which Felix Parry had that day acted, something out of the ordinary was still expected from him.

As hinted at in another place, there were a few supplementary rules attached to the main contest, by complying with which any defeated aspirant could oblige the champion to make his claim to superiority doubly good, or, on certain other conditions being fulfilled, could even transfer that title to himself.

This matter was still being busily discussed when Felix Parry returned from his chase after Dun Devil, a certain grim, fierce light in his eyes betraying the truth; the yellow steer would never again bring disaster upon his dearest hopes.

With troubled face Arnold Parry intercepted his son, drawing apart and apparently talking earnestly to him for some little time. Of course none other could say with certainty what that conversation was about, but many were willing to guess at its nature when they saw that Felix took no steps toward challenging the champion to the second test.

On the whole it was a rather delicate matter to broach, bearing in mind all that had transpired, but lunch was rapidly being prepared, and deeming it best to get all business cares off their minds before that welcome summons, the three judges put their heads together and quickly reached a conclusion.

Instant silence reigned as the chief judge rode into the cleared space, lifting his hat by way of demanding attention.

"Unless some one of those so entitled by the rules wishes to challenge the right of Robert Runnover to wear the title and emblem of Range Champion from now until the next regular meeting, that right and title will be so recorded."

Silence reigned after this somewhat labored sentence, and as if involuntarily scores of curious eyes were turned toward the owner of the Tarantula Ranch, in whose colors Owen Taylor had run.

That owner, Lycurgus Dunklin by name, a red-faced, jolly-looking grazier who was almost as broad as he was long, turned fairly purple in the face as he found himself the present center of attraction. Right or wrongly he felt that he had lost caste by putting forward "foreign talent" to oppose home skill, but now he made the most of it.

"Not any more in mine, if you please, gentlemen. I expect the old lady will kick me out of house and home when I go to the Tarantula this night as it is. So—count Curg. Dunklin as a Run-over man from now until the crack o' doom!"

Whether he meant it or not, that atrocious pun carried the crowd away, and for nearly a minute it was all a man could do to hear himself howl. But the judge lifted his hand again, and silence followed.

Longer than many expected, too, for no one spoke up to put in another bid for the championship. And only negatives came in answer as the judge called over the list of ranches which had entered representatives.

He was on the point of declaring that Riata Rob was confirmed in his honors until the next ensuing meeting when Owen Taylor quietly stepped before him, lifting his hat and speaking modestly:

"As a comparative stranger here, judge and gentlemen, may I ask for a little more light on this matter?"

"What is it you wish to know?" rather curtly demanded the judge.

"Whether the record won goes to the ranch whose representative made it, or does it attach to the man himself?"

"To the individual, of course, sir."

"Then, in case he should be so foolhardy, that man could demand another show for the title?"

"By complying with the rules made and provided—yes."

"Would it be too much trouble for you to enlighten a stranger on that point?" smilingly persisted Taylor, his voice as smooth and purring as that of a sleepy cat.

Judging from the frown upon his face the judge would dearly like to refuse, but as he had taken part in formulating those very rules, he knew that Owen Taylor was keeping strictly within his rights.

"If you wish to challenge the champion to a second test, your first move is to make a deposit of one hundred dollars with the secretary of this association as a forfeit."

The man from El Paso slipped a bank-note from his pocket, just as though he had come provided for that very purpose, and handed it to the judge before him, bowing blandly.

"Not having the pleasure of knowing who the secretary is, will you favor me by transferring the forfeit to him, dear sir?"

Despite himself, the judge was gradually being won over by this soft-spoken, pleasant-faced stranger, and in more friendly tones he produced a copy of the rules governing the contest for the championship, reading over those sections dealing with the point in hand.

A forfeit of one hundred dollars was to be deposited with the secretary as proof that the challenge was in earnest, and not made simply through spite or empty chagrin.

The man who challenged was to produce an animal for the champion to rope, throw and tie; not necessarily in less or even equal time to that in which his title had been won in the main event, but if he succeeded in doing the work out for him, and the challenger felt that he had taken more time than was necessary, he could file an objection, and the judges must decide whether to overrule it, or to produce an animal of like quality for the challenger to test his own skill upon.

If the champion failed to throw and tie the animal provided, he was to pay an amount equal to the forfeit into the treasury; said forfeit being returned to the man contesting on his performing the feat himself; failing to do that, he was to pay double the forfeit, or stand forever debarred from competing for the medal and title thereafter.

If the champion for any reason refused to accept the task set him, and the one challenging should perform the feat, then the medal and accompanying title was to be transferred to the victor.

Owen Taylor stood with bowed head, still uncovered, listening intently while the judge made known all the conditions. Then he looked up to softly ask:

"One item more, please. Is there any restriction placed on the animal, as to size, weight, age or anything of that sort, sir?"

"Nothing of the kind, but," with a dry laugh, as he refolded the copy of rules, and placed it in his breast, "I'd be pretty sure to pick out a critter that I knew I could throw and tie myself, before putting it forward for my rival!"

"Many thanks, dear sir," smiled Taylor, bowing lowly as he backed away a few paces before putting on his hat. "Then I have complied with the rules, so far?"

"Your forfeit is up, yes, but it still remains for you to challenge Riata Rob for the trial."

The crowd scattered, each man looking around in quest of Riata Rob, but he evidently did not form one of that gathering, though he could hardly be ignorant of what was in the wind. The very breeze must have carried the news to him, had there lacked less practical methods of information.

It did not take long to discover the Range Champion, however. Rob had been apart with Sybil, for naturally she wanted to tell him how proud his five-fold victory had made her, and all that; but when he saw the crowd break up, he whispered her to await his return, and came forward to meet Owen Taylor half-way.

"I was so delighted with the sample of work you gave us, dear Mr. Runnover, that I've put up a little money on the chance of seeing more of the same sort," he said, bowing politely.

"In plain words, you challenge me to a second trial?" coldly interposed Riata Rob, and when Taylor bowed again, he sternly cried: "All right, El Paso! I'll throw and tie your animal, then bet big odds I can serve its master in precisely the same way!"

CHAPTER XVI.

OWEN TAYLOR'S LITTLE PET.

EVEN a bold man might have been pardoned for recoiling a trifle from those words—hot and full of hatred that only blood could quench, yet cold and almost devilish in their subdued ferocity.

But Owen Taylor never flinched still with that maddening smile upon his strong face as he faced the champion still. And there was nothing but easy politeness in his tones as he made reply:

"Business first, Mr. Runnover; let pleasure follow, if you will have it that way."

"I'll mix pleasure with business, and get a

good fill of the first while downing both you and your pet brute!"

The crowd was gathering around the rivals, and though he knew this was for the most part composed of his friends and enthusiastic backers, that knowledge had naught to do with influencing the speech of Riata Rob. That was born purely of his strong hatred for this smiling stranger whom no one seemed to know better than himself.

Owen Taylor had dropped down in their midst, little less than one month before that day, claiming to be desirous of investing in a good ranch for growing cattle. In some manner he had won the good graces of Felix Parry, and through that young man had become a guest at Good Luck Ranch, where he seemed to have become a permanent fixture.

To his influence Riata Rob attributed the sudden and complete loss of Felix Parry's good will, which he felt all the more keenly on Sybil's account, though it was bitter enough to himself, since one short week more was to see that hot-headed young man transformed into a brother by law.

Then, too, Sybil had begun to act strangely on various occasions, and his jealous temper took fire lest this smiling scoundrel was trying to undermine him in that quarter, as well.

Not that he could or did doubt the strength and purity of her love for him; that she could prove either weak or false to her troth even he was not mad enough to suspect even for an instant. But with such a glorious temptation beneath the same roof, how could a man like this smiling, soft-handed gambler help trying to make love to her?

And only a few hours before, Sybil herself had as good as confirmed that maddening suspicion; for what else could her words have meant?

Taking all this into consideration, it is not so strange that Riata Rob should in a measure lose his head when brought into actual contact with the man he was learning to hate with a venom that naught but blood could satisfactorily quench.

Even Owen Taylor seemed to divine something of this truth, for though that peculiar smile still played about his bearded lips, his tones grew a little sharper, a little less suave.

"So I hear you say, Mr. Runnover, but, if I might advise, it would be better for you to clinch your championship. I am just impudent enough to doubt that you are either able or worthy to hold it. My money says you can't, and money talks louder than wind."

"I never knew a better judge—of the last-named article!"

"Thanks, many," smiled Taylor, with a low bow. "At the same time, let me gently whisper that my forfeit is in the hands of the proper official. When you cover that—"

"It is covered, sir, and enough more just as good back of the forfeit to bury you alive beneath its weight!" harshly interposed Jason Runnover, whose ready pocketbook had been at work.

"You're so kind!" purred Taylor, with a smiling glance over his shoulder, then turning again to Riata Rob. "As I started out to say, dear Mr. Runnover, first clinch your title, then—"

"Then I'll down you for all time!" flashed Riata Rob, with utmost difficulty keeping himself from leaping straight at the throat of the suave rascal whose soft speech and bland smile was to his hot temper what the red flag is to a maddened bull in the ring.

"Or bite the dust yourself," coolly bowed the man from El Paso, turning away as though bent on expediting the business in hand, paying not the slightest attention to the call which Jason Runnover sent after him.

"Empty your pockets before you make a run, I beg of you, dear fellow!" he cried, with a grim mockery in his last words that the crowd was quick to recognize and applaud. "A thoroughbred gambler ought to know better how to face the music he himself has set up!"

Owen Taylor never turned his head or gave other evidence that he heard this derisive challenge. He pressed clear of the crowd and when part way to the corral, made a sign that seemed to be fully understood by a mounted cowboy, who immediately put spurs to his horse and rode off at top speed.

"One of your outfit, Dunklin!" cried a neighbor, half-angrily. "I thought you'd given over bucking against your own section?"

"Devil toast him! so I have, but— Well, it isn't half an hour ago that the blame'rascal told me he was tired of ranch life, and gave me notice to quit!" hastily spluttered the fat rancher.

Riata Rob fell a little apart from the crowd, but he made no move toward rejoining Sybil, though he had so pledged himself. Just then he was in no fit mood for her society. His blood was on fire, and he felt far more like using steel or lead than bandying soft endearments.

But Run-over Ranch did not lack for a sturdy representative. Jason Runnover seemed entirely transformed to those who had only known him of later years, a gloomy, soured, disappointed man.

Now he was all fire and excitement, his tongue hanging free and mouthing sentences such as none but an old sport could manipulate so briskly. And with a handful of crisp notes fluttering in the breeze as he shook his bony hand above his head, he made known his implicit confidence in the skill of his boy.

"Money talks, and I'm the tongue it chooses to represent its sentiments, gentlemen!" he cried, his notes shrill and defiant, recklessly defying both friend and enemy. "My boy against all the world—this and the next, if there be one lying around loose! I'm shouting music, but all Run-over stands ready to back up my notes with good solid cash or equally valuable collateral! Dollars to dimes, if no less tempting offer will start the sporting blood circulating plainly enough for my old eyes to catch a glimpse of it! Dollars to dimes, from one to fifty thousand, that my boy downs both Taylor and his pet!"

As was naturally to be expected, by far the greater portion of the present gathering was strongly in favor of Riata Rob, whose unequalled record so recently made seemed in part a triumph in which all present shared; for the champion was of their own section, and for this reason alone Jason Runnover was permitted to rattle on so long without any person coming forward to take him up.

But the sporting fever is powerful, and is rarely a respecter of persons. The crowd began to shift nervously, and Riata Rob was cool-witted enough to realize that unless he should be prompt, his enthusiastic parent might well find his hands too full for profit at such wild odds.

He quickly sought his father's side, catching an arm and hurriedly muttering in an ear:

"If you can force that cur to put up his money at any odds, all right, but I beg of you not to make more enemies for me out of our friends!"

As he cast a quick glance over the crowd he thus summed up, Riata Rob saw Owen Taylor standing near the edge of the gathering, that eternal smile upon his face, but with a half-sneering glow in his dark eyes.

That was like a blazing brand cast into a loft filled with loose tow, though for a few moments he was able to hold the blaze in check.

"As for you, friends, neighbors, gentlemen," he cried, taking in the company by a sweep of his hand. "As one of yourselves, I earnestly beg of you not to interfere in this bit of dirty work. If it was anything like a decent job, I'd never say a word to keep you outside, but as matters now stand, it is Run-over Ranch against a faro-sharp!"

He paused, his gleaming eyes fixed upon Owen Taylor, but that gentleman only smiled the broader, saying naught.

Feeling that his fiery temper kept him at a serious disadvantage while in contact with such a cool and level head, Riata Rob smothered his hot passions as well as he could, speaking deliberately:

"You ought to know me well enough by this time, gentlemen, to feel reasonably confident that I couldn't stand up and deliberately utter a series of lies to your very faces, and hence I trust you will believe me when I say that if one of our range, or any other *white man*, had entered this supplementary challenge, I would have resigned all claims to the title and even gladly given him this medal, without a contest. I am tired of wearing either title or medal! It has brought me nothing but bad luck and worse jealousies.

"Instead of that white man, a wandering card-sharp comes shooting off his mouth, trying to claim the medal that only an honest breast has ever worn! So—I'll down him once more, and down him so hard that he'll never lift his head in decent circles again!"

"Now for you, El Paso!" turning toward the still smiling stranger. "Name your pile, and I'll cover it with any odds you dare call aloud! Lump the pile: money, horse, arms, clothes—your carcass don't count!"

"You dub me a card-sharp, Robert Runnover, but—"

"Dare you deny it?" flashed Riata Rob, swiftly.

"You dub me gambler, but even if I am one, I never yet permitted a man—gentleman or rogue—to place a wager against me or mine with his eyes shut. Wait until you have interviewed my little pet, and then I'm open to talk strict business with you, sir."

As he spoke, Owen Taylor swung out a hand, and as all eyes mechanically followed his pointing finger, a strong cart, bearing a cage of heavy timbers, closely put together, was observed just coming into view over the little swell in the plain beyond the corrals.

There was a brief period of silent wonder, but then the truth flashed over nearly every one present like an inspiration.

A chorus of excited cries, amidst which were many denouncing the coolly-smiling gambler, burst from the crowd; but the stranger showed no signs of flinching or of losing his temper.

"I am keeping strictly inside of your own rules, gentlemen," he calmly said, shrugging his shoulders slightly as he moved away toward

the oncoming cart. "If your pet champion is afraid, let him admit as much in plain words, and be sure I'll make good my portion of the contract!"

"Your pet first, Owen Taylor, then yourself!" flashed Riata Rob, letting the main crowd pass him by in their natural eagerness to view the contents of that massive cage.

Riata Rob schooled his angry features as he saw Sybil Parry coming to meet him, and he succeeded fairly well in so doing. But for once the maiden forgot to answer his smile in kind, her own face pale and full of deep anxiety as he caught her trembling hands as they reached out toward him.

"Oh, Robert, what is it?" Sybil almost sobbed, her eyes trying to read the whole truth in the face of her lover. "They say—I heard them talking about—you must not run such horrible risks!"

"The risk is far more in seeming than in reality, little woman," he replied, drawing a hand through his arm and leading her further away from the spot where the cart must soon come to a halt. "That pitiful scoundrel has caught a bear somewhere, and means to spring it upon me."

"But you can't—"

"I can and will!" with a vicious snap of his strong teeth, his eyes flashing vividly. "How could I fail before all this crowd—and with you looking on, dear heart? I couldn't! I'd far rather die ten thousand deaths rolled up in one!"

CHAPTER XVII.

READING HIS TITLE CLEAR.

FELIX PARRY was one of the first to gain a near view of the cage occupant, and he laughed aloud as a savage snarl came from out that shaggy mass, too closely pent up between those strong timbers to fully display its powers for destruction.

He believed that in this he saw the means of humiliating the man who had plucked glory and fresh laurels from what had only covered himself with shame and bitter mortification. But even in his temporary madness he retained sufficient shrewdness to know that he could do his cause little good by making his exultation too prominent.

Even those who were the most eager to view the bear, or such as was visible through the narrow slits in the timbers that held the ugly brute cased almost as closely as the shell does a chrysalis, were freely expressing their disgust or indignation at such a scurvy trick.

"It's a clean put-up job to down a man they nuther one o' them dast to even dream o' facin' on the even!" bluntly declared one, giving a nod toward Felix Parry that sufficiently pointed his meaning.

"Sarve the grinnin' Chessy cat right to double-loop a lariat an' hitch 'em neck an' neck to fight it out: fo'-legged b'ar an' two-legged cur!" even more pointedly cried another ranchman.

Still, no one offered to do more than talk, and so long as he was permitted to walk strictly within his rights, under the rules, Owen Taylor seemed perfectly satisfied.

He gave the cowboys in charge of the cage their instructions, then went to look after his other investment, the big black horse which had already done him such good service.

There came a slight change in the general manner at this, for if the fellow was ready to take a dose of the same medicine he had provided for another, he could not be altogether beyond the pale!

Riata Rob was still with Sybil, who repeatedly begged her lover to yield the medal and refuse to sacrifice his life just to suit the evil schemes of an unscrupulous enemy.

"Not even for your sweet sake, little woman," he quietly said, apparently once more in perfect control of his fiery temper. "I'd roll both brute and cur in the dust now if I knew it would be my last act on earth!"

Dearly as he loved the maiden, Riata Rob was trying to devise some method by which he could get away for a short time without hurting her feelings too badly, for he meant that one lesson should be quite sufficient to satisfy Owen Taylor; but he was shortly relieved by the coming of Jason Runnover, whose gaunt visage was flushed with excitement.

"The scoundrel isn't all wind, lad!" was his blunt salutation. "I got an even five thousand out of him, in good solid money!"

"Is that all?" in mock surprise. "I rather thought he carried a national bank in each pocket, with a private bonanza or two as make-weight, from his talk."

"Quite enough for the empty pleasure of bluffing," chuckled the master of Run-over Ranch, but adding in a tone that betrayed a little more respect for the man from El Paso: "He's a thoroughbred, in his own line, Robert, and actually making ready to tackle King Bruin in case your nerve should go back on you—yes, he is, now!"

Satisfied that Owen Taylor could not be made to forfeit a heavier sum by backing his venture, Riata Rob let his mind fall easy on that point, simply asking Jason Runnover to have Billy Black look to Red Prince and his accouterments,

then devoted himself to soothing the natural fears of his sweetheart, succeeding so well in this that, when the warning word was given to prepare for the test, Sybil parted from him with a smile on her lip, if a tear was in her eyes.

"Promise me that you will look after my bride, father," Riata Rob earnestly whispered. "The bear may make a charge in spite of me, and without feeling *she* was secure, I'd surely lose my nerve!"

"I'll do it—for your sake, not for theirs, lad," was the grim reply, with which Riata Rob was forced to be content.

As there could be no question of time limits in dealing with such an animal, all concerned showed no particular haste in falling to work.

Riata Rob, provided with such weapons and aids as he saw fit to select for the work in hand, mounted Red Prince, knowing that everything was in order for the effort of his life. And then he gave the signal to turn the brute free!

A cowboy had already hitched his lasso to the end of a strong bar which, running through iron staples, held the entire front of the cage in place. And as the signal was given, he touched his mustang with the spurs, jerking the bar from its fastenings, permitting the front to drop down like the falling-leaf of a table.

And with a howl of mingled rage and satisfaction the bear rolled end-long out of its close quarters, quickly rising to its haunches and swinging its gaunt head to and fro as it took in the situation.

The cowboy was far beyond reach, and the spectators, all in the saddle, were at a respectful distance, having seen enough of the brute to feel that he would prove a decidedly ugly customer at best.

Yet not one among them all had done the beast full justice while viewing him in his cage. Now that he was outside, free of limb and grinning of jaws, he seemed doubly as large, and even more formidable.

He was a grizzly, or the silver-tip species, and though not the largest of his race, was all the more active and to be dreaded on that account.

So much the breathless spectators had time to realize, when the silver-tip gave an ugly roar and lunged forward, bearing straight for the nearest horses, barring Red Prince.

Everything went to prove that the brute had been starved and tormented since his capture, and amid the cries of mutual warning were other sounds far less pleasant for Owen Taylor to hear.

Riata Rob was holding a coiled lasso in his hand, ready for use as circumstances or his better judgment should dictate, and though Red Prince was pricking his ears and quivering perceptibly with alarm, a gentle touch of the spurs sent the noble steed forward, straight across the line taken by the grizzly, Riata Rob leaning over to strike him once, twice in the face with the rope.

A savage roar followed this insult, and the silver-tip blindly swerved to charge after the horseman, which was precisely the object Riata Rob was playing for. And keeping Red Prince under close control he leaned back, and, turning half around in the saddle, lengthened the loop of the lasso, shooting it back to repeatedly strike that scarred muzzle, managing it so deftly that the silver-tip vainly strove to catch the rope in its paws.

A wild cheer burst forth at this, for all could see that Riata Rob was risking an accident to himself or horse, mainly to draw the beast far enough from the excited crowd to leave them in perfect safety.

This he was not long in doing, thanks to the blind rage of the seemingly clumsy brute, and when satisfied that he had ample room for his maneuverings, with naught to take his attention from the formidable task in hand, Riata Rob lost little time in getting down to business.

Quickly coiling the lasso to suit him, he watched his chance and made his cast, the loop settling fairly about the neck of the silver-tip in spite of the vicious blow he made at the rope, and though it stopped short, rearing up on its haunches and trying to tear the loop from its neck with a paw, Red Prince was too swift for it.

The rawhide lasso drew taut with a musical twang, and the awkward brute was flung headlong to the ground, roaring in muffled notes, tearing up the dust and hurling clods of dirt high into the air.

"Steady, old fellow!" cried Riata Rob, giving Red Prince a soothing tap on the proudly-arched neck as the gallant stallion kept the rope taut. "You and I against the whole world, now!"

He took a second lasso from where it hung over the horn, jumping lightly to the ground with another word of warning to his steed, then running swiftly so as to get to the rear of the bear, which was just then scrambling to its feet in spite of the suffocating noose and the constant strain on the *riata*.

In passing, Riata Rob shot out an end of his lariat, but it was not in an effort to secure the bear with the noose, but rather to madden the huge animal still more thoroughly, knowing as he did that each minute spent with that lasso

encircling its throat and compressing its wind-pipe was rendering it less difficult to handle.

The slap of the lariat called the silver-tip's attention that way and caused it to lunge out in a vicious blow at the daring man who thus insulted it, but Red Prince was on the alert, and giving a jump ahead once more toppled the maddened beast headlong. And before it could roll far enough ahead to gain slack rope sufficient to permit it to regain its footing, Riata Rob caught both hind feet in his second lasso by a neat underhand cast.

A shrill whistle caused Red Prince to stop short and give the bear sufficient slack to rear up on its haunches, roaring madly as it tore great bunches of hair from its neck in striving to get at that cruel noose. Another signal, and Red Prince leaped ahead, while Riata Rob at the same moment flung all his strength into a backward jerk, the double strain flinging the silver-tip flat on its back.

Riata Rob sprung forward and attempted to secure the turn he was playing for, but in its furious struggles the bear struck him with one hind leg so forcibly as to knock him down. And whirling about as if on a pivot, the maddened creature endeavored to fling itself upon the prostrate ranchero.

A cry of horror went up from the breathless spectators at this, and a number of them started forward to the rescue, but Riata Rob sent out a peculiar yell that redoubled the efforts of Red Prince, and the bear was once more jerked from its footing, giving the endangered man time to roll swiftly over until he had room for leaping to his feet.

The lariat was still in his hand, the loop still over both hind legs of the struggling bear, though the noose was so loose that at each moment it bade fair to be kicked off.

So those who watched appeared to think, but Riata Rob was fairly alive to the situation, and with his blood up to boiling pitch, he took the risk of another and more disastrous stroke, springing close past the bear even as it partly regained its footing, passing his rope over the riata controlled by Red Prince, and then, as Bruin reared up, actually flinging the remaining coil between his hind legs, above the loop which had dropped almost to its feet.

Another call to Red Prince increased the strain upon the bear's neck, keeping its attention turned toward its tightly-compressed throat and giving Riata Rob an opportunity to dart in and recover his lasso, with which, braced against his body, he ran backward until, under the double strain, the brute once more toppled over, its head and hind paws drawn closely together.

Both horse and master worked in perfect unison, the movements of Riata Rob being so swift, and the dust-cloud that rose from the mad struggles of the silver-tip being so dense, that even the keenest-eyed spectator could only imperfectly follow his actions. But they could see that, keeping up his tension and thus hampering the movements of the bear, Riata Rob was working to catch the forepaws in a loop as well, with every prospect of speedy success.

This he did, by boldly gaining the side of the growling, snarling beast, and drawing the loop down until all four paws met, he swiftly made the riata fast, with the worst of his task completed.

Taking a strong length of plaited rawhide, greased until perfectly pliable, while retaining the strength of steel wire, Riata Rob cast a double noose over the frothing jaws, drawing the muzzle tight and thus knotting it back of the bear's ears, forming a perfect muzzle.

Suddenly all saw him spring erect, uttering a sharp cry!

CHAPTER XVIII.

RIATA ROB RUBS IT IN.

THE painfully pent-up emotions found vent in a mighty yell, in which the shriller notes of women were blended with the hoarser voices of men, and there was a general movement to the front, checked as quickly by the sharp voice of Riata Rob as he cried aloud:

"Back! keep your distance, all!"

There was a general recoil, but the clear, mellow voice of Widow Kate Malin rose high above the tumult with the words:

"Sure, it's hard waiting, man, dear! And we only asking to hug ye—for your mother, faith!"

But Riata Rob paid no attention to words or actions, plainly bent in making his triumph complete beyond all doubt or cavil. And after all that had transpired that day, who could blame him for wishing to sip the cup instead of draining it without stopping to taste?

That shrill cry was intended for Red Prince, and it was promptly obeyed, the gallant creature relaxing its strain on the lasso, facing around and gingerly approaching, uttering a low whimper in which affection for its master was blended with fear of that shaggy mass of fire and fury.

For, though hampered, the silver-tip was by no means subdued, rolling and quivering much as though it had swallowed a miniature earthquake, desperately striving to break its bonds, casting great gusts of bloody froth about as it

tossed its scarred head all the more furiously now that the strain had slackened about its neck.

With a cat-like leap Riata Rob sprung astride the shaggy mass, clinching it tight with his lower limbs, knotting his long rowels in the fur and clutching a fold of skin near its neck with one hand while with the other he loosened the noose, casting off the lariat entirely.

Again that enthusiastic cheer broke forth, but after that recent sharp repulse, no one ventured to advance without permission.

Riata Rob released his grasp and sprung to his feet, but without so much as giving a glance toward the crowd, or in any manner acknowledging that ovation. So far as his actions went, they might as well have been at the other side of the globe.

The hampered bear was still struggling, though with lessened ferocity, seemingly content to gain a comparatively free breath once more after that terrible choking; but disregarding this, Riata Rob stood near enough to plant one foot upon the body, holding out a hand toward his horse, snapping his fingers sharply.

With arched neck and pricked ears, its red nostrils widely dilated and quivering, its eyes glowing like fireballs, the noble stallion advanced, pace by pace, as though drawn toward that object of terror by some magical power which it was unable to resist.

It stopped short, shivering in every muscle as the silver-tip renewed its struggles, sending forth a savage roar through its muzzled jaws; but Riata Rob had set his mind on a certain victory, and was not in the humor just then for trifling, even with a creature so loved as was Red Prince.

"Steady, lad!" he cried, sharply, snapping his fingers again. "I'm speaking; come to me, old fellow!"

With a low whimper that was almost human in its intelligence, Red Prince trotted forward, only halting as Riata Rob held up a hand. And though it trembled from head to hoof, the noble creature never drew back an inch when the grizzly roared again, fairly rolling over, hampered as it was.

"Steady, Prince!" commanded Riata Rob, his voice ringing out so clear and distinct that all near could catch his full meaning. "Show the company how we—both horse and master—put our feet upon our enemies! Wipe your shoe on the dirty cur, Red Prince!"

Just as though he could interpret words as readily as signals, the bay stallion lifted a forefoot and struck spitefully at that hairy mass. And as Bruin gave another roar, shaking like a lump of jelly as it gave a savage test of its bonds, Red Prince shot out his head and with a vicious snap of his jaws tore out a mouthful of fur!

"Back, sir!" sharply ordered the Range Champion, tapping the now eager stallion on the muzzle. "Don't disgrace your breeding by stooping too low. Only our feet for such enemies!"

Jason Runnover broke forth in a harsh cheer, but no one else joined in it. Not one within reach of those bitter words but knew only too well the meaning hidden behind them. And though their sympathies were undoubtedly with the champion who had so thoroughly proven himself fit to wear the title he had won before, few of them wished matters to go much further.

Many a covert glance was cast toward Owen Taylor, who sat his big black horse in silence, for all knew that Riata Rob intended that cutting speech for the man from El Paso; but that same cool smile was on his face, and not one in all that gathering appeared to take the victory so easily, so calmly and agreeably, as the man to whom it meant complete defeat at all points.

Motioning Red Prince to the rear, Riata Rob stood with one foot upon the helpless grizzly, maintaining silence until his signal was complied with. Then, turning toward the crowd, he lifted his hat and called out in clear tones:

"Ladies and gentlemen—for, after all, you are the true judges of the work done here to-day—"

"Sure, there's nobody in it but you, man, dear!" impulsively cried Widow Kate, her accent coming out strongly, as it ever did when mirth or excitement stirred her warm blood.

A wild cheer followed her speech, and once more Riata Rob was compelled to lift his hand in stern warning, crying out coldly:

"Oblige me, please. All I ask is a clear field and no favor, but until every one has expressed their perfect satisfaction with my work, that field belongs solely to me; and after what has taken place this day, I'm standing on the very letter of the law.

"Gentlemen judges, will you be kind enough to state, publicly, whether or no I have performed the task set me?"

"You have, sir, and doubly earned the title of Range Champion!" was the instant response.

"May you live long to repeat your glorious triumphs, sir! Our triumphs, I might say, for we are more than proud to lay claim to a residence in the same section which is highly honored by numbering yourself among its citizens, sir."

Riata Rob bowed low, with a faint smile curling his lips, but still he did not seem satisfied; even yet he was not ready to accept the ovation which only awaited his pleasure.

His gray eyes roved slowly along the ranks, pausing at length at the point where Owen Taylor sat in the saddle, with a gaze so pointed that every one present readily understood its meaning.

The man from El Paso was no slower witted than his neighbors, but his smiling countenance gave no sign of uneasiness or irritation. If anything, it grew still more peaceful, though none could say that there was aught fawning about his smile.

"I thank you, gentlemen, for your prompt decision, and at any other time or under any other circumstances, I would certainly consider it everything that was necessary. But I've learned wisdom since the sun last rose, and so beg your indulgence yet a little longer.

"Is there such a person among this gathering as Owen Taylor—so-called?"

"At your service, Sir Champion!" blandly called forth the man from El Paso, sending his black horse a few yards toward the front, doffing his hat and bowing toward the erect visitor.

"Will you oblige me by coming yet a little closer?" quietly added Riata Rob. "I am used to talking face to face, whether it be to friend or foe."

"With all the pleasure in life, Mr. Runnover," bowed Taylor, leaping from the saddle and letting the black horse—already a bit restless as the bound grizzly sent forth a fresh roar of fury—go free.

There was an uneasy stir among the company at this, for more than one of those present fully expected to see weapons drawn and hear the ugly rattle of death-shots between the rivals.

Sybil Parry gave a little cry, stifled in its birth by the ready palm of Jason Runnover, who swiftly whispered reassurance to the fair being left in his charge by Champion Rob.

Hot though his temper was, and bitter cause though he might have for hating this quietly-smiling stranger, Riata Rob had no intention of coming to actual blows with Owen Taylor, then or there; and all the company realized as much when they saw him coolly seat himself upon that shaggy mass of ferocious impotence.

"Your name is Owen Taylor—for the present, I believe?" he asked, as innocently as though they two had never before had the exquisite pleasure of meeting. "And you rode under the colors of the Tarantula Ranch?"

"Only to have them lowered by a—shall I say better man?" smilingly replied the man from El Paso.

"There's many a word spoken in jest, Mr. Taylor," flashed Riata Rob, a little of his real temper betraying itself at that opening. "But you were not content with having this superiority once displayed. You thought to down me by springing a put-up job; for this brute wasn't captured and caged this same day!"

"Not by three days; four, counting the present, to be accurate."

"Then you admit that it was a put-up job?"

"I admit doing all that lay in my power to take the championship from you—yes, Mr. Runnover."

Coolly, easily, still with that irritating smile on his strong face did Owen Taylor answer every question, and despite their sympathies inclined to the other side, the crowd was gradually coming to think less hardly of the stranger. Only a man of wonderful nerve and sterling honesty could make such easy confession before such a gathering.

Riata Rob felt something of this, but he had marked out a line for himself, and doggedly resolved to follow it to the very end, let the consequences be what they might.

"Well, are you satisfied with the result?"

"I have to be," with a short laugh. "If you mean am I satisfied with the manner in which you have done your work, I answer yes. And permit me to add—you are right worthy the title of champion!"

"Then my work was fairly done?" persisted Riata Rob, paying no attention to that frank compliment. "There was no trickery on my part beyond what the rules allow? No hoodoo business over which you can make another kick?"

"Owen Taylor bowed in silence. To those who looked on, it seemed as though his remarkable fund of good nature was beginning to run low.

"Good enough—so far," grimly nodded Riata Rob, a smile flitting across his own face as he added: "I wasn't too busy to see that you were watching me mighty closely, but that don't count. You're too smart a player to need any wrinkles such as you might pick up from the work of another, and so—I've got money that says you can't duplicate my work, even on your own little pet!"

Owen Taylor smiled again, but this time after a cold, grim fashion that betrayed anything but mirth, but his tones were even as he said:

"You're safe in rubbing it in, Robert Runnover, since your father has won my boodle. I'll have to borrow money to pay my men their dues."

You hired them to catch this brute, just to down me, then?"

"I did," was the blunt response.

"May I ask your reasons for all this?"

"If you really need telling, I'll be happy to enlighten you just as soon as this little circus comes to an end; say to-morrow!"

"All right. I'll hunt you up unless you're a better runner than I am. Meanwhile—here's your little pet; take good care of him—if you know how and can!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A NEAT BIT OF WORK.

It was not altogether a love of ostentation that made Riata Rob seat himself on that uneasy mass of shaggy fur, though no doubt that held a certain share in his mind. But as he uttered those sharp, almost fierce words, his real purpose was made manifest unto all.

Under cover he had dropped his bared bowie-knife, strong of blade and keen as a razor, upon the dense coat of the grizzly. During the last few seconds his hand was busy, and now, with a mighty slash that entirely severed the lasso confining the grizzly brute's legs, and a lightning pass that cut the thong that rendered those ugly jaws harmless, Riata Rob sprang to his feet and back toward Red Prince, who stood awaiting the further orders of his master.

That last slash had cut the silver-tip to the bone along one jaw, and the stinging smart no doubt lent it a bit more activity than might otherwise have been displayed.

With a savage roar, the huge beast made a scrambling lunge forward and gained its footing, so close to Owen Taylor, though the man from El Paso had instinctively sprung backward, that it seemed as though its widely separating jaws must surely close upon his person the next instant.

Riata Rob, with a short, fierce laugh of hardly human rancor, sprang into the saddle, wheeling Red Prince to insure his own safety, looking back over his shoulder toward the man whom his totally unexpected action had placed in such deadly peril.

"Trap for trap, El Paso! And if you get out of this one, we'll call it even on set-up jobs!"

"You kicked—wait until you catch me doing the same!"

Clear and cool and even came the retort, proving that, though undoubtedly taken off his guard for once, Owen Taylor was far from being "rattled" or losing confidence in his own resources.

The sound of his voice, however, served to draw the attention of the silver-tip exclusively to him, and with a savage roar the maddened brute made a plunge directly at the footman.

With marvelous activity Owen Taylor sprang aside, then darted at full speed past the bear, narrowly escaping the awkward stroke which was made at his flying figure as it shot by.

This action led him straight toward Riata Rob, who for the moment believed the man from down-country was hoping to save himself by leaping upon Red Prince or its master.

"Good-evening, El Paso!" he laughed, mockingly, as a touch of the keen steel sent the bay stallion far ahead.

But nothing was further from Owen Taylor's thoughts, just then, as his action plainly proved.

Felix Parry was spurring toward him, generously hoping to save the life of his friend by risking his own, and still others were showing their good-will and their weapons at one and the same time; but in a voice that rung out even above the roar of that maddened brute, Owen Taylor shouted:

"Back, everybody! I can and will take care of my pet!"

The silver-tip had turned about, and was again charging upon the footman, the very personification of rage and fury; but Taylor boldly faced the creature, a revolver in each hand, the weapon in his right seeming to pour forth a constant stream of bullets, though they were unable to entirely check that mad charge.

The sixth shot came when the bear was almost within arm's-length, the burning powder actually singeing the hair and for the moment blinding the great brute. Up went its muzzle, streaming with blood. A huge paw was brushed viciously over its blinded eyes. And a great cheer went up from the thrilled spectators as they saw the man from El Paso had not flinched even an inch.

But now he sprang lightly backward a couple of paces, dropping his empty revolver only to open fire with the other, using his left hand with as much accuracy as he had shown with the other.

"Blinding the critter, by glory!" fairly howled Felix Parry, almost beside himself with grim delight at the turn events were taking. "Who wants to bet on brute against man?"

If any one did, time was hardly granted them for expressing their preference.

The second revolver was emptied with almost the same results as had followed the first, though it was plainly seen that the great brute had received serious if not fatal injuries, thanks to the close quarters held thus far. But the silver-tip was still dangerous, and none knew this better than the stranger who had so

unexpectedly blossomed forth as a true "man of grit."

He dropped his second pistol when the bear was hardly a yard distant, blindly lunging forward at its agile adversary. He sprang to one side as he had done before, but instead of running entirely past the maddened beast, Owen Taylor paused close to its side, leaning over and plunging a long, keen blade to the very hilt, just back of the extended fore leg.

With a hideous "bawl"—no other term will describe it—the silver-tip swung its clashing jaws around to catch the audacious enemy who bit so keenly; but Owen Taylor had proven himself a true bear-hunter, having fairly leaned over the animal to inflict the death-wound on the side opposite himself.

For death-wound it proved, added to the bullets which had already found its brain, through both eye-sockets. And with that one horrible bawl, the silver-tip rolled over and over in the agonies of death!

It took several seconds for the dust-cloud to dissipate sufficiently to let the eager spectators see just what had taken place, but when the truth was fully realized, their united cheers and yells and screams of wild approval fairly rent the air.

The bear lay dead, only a few feet from where it had lain when Riata Rob had maliciously cut its bonds and sent it howling at the man who had brought it to the grounds in hopes of humiliating him before that assembly. And that same man, though taken by surprise, armed with weapons such as none in their senses would have elected to fight such an ugly customer, had killed the silver-tip unaided, all without stepping over the limits of a fairly large room.

It was an exploit well deserving an ovation, and Owen Taylor acknowledged those enthusiastic cheers by lifting his hat and bowing profoundly.

Nor was his cause at all injured by his still wearing that enigmatical smile; cool, self-reliant, even if half-quizzical.

Through it all Riata Rob had held Red Prince well in hand, watching the swift, deadly movements with a hard, cruel smile showing his white teeth and a glow in his gray eyes that told he would never lift hand or draw weapon even to save the life his action had cast into danger. With his own hands El Paso had dug this pit; of his own resources let him climb out of it!

So he told himself deep down in his heart, though what would have been his actions had the outcome proved different can only be guessed at. For despite himself, it seemed, when Owen Taylor proved the victor after such an adroit fashion, Riata Rob quickly added his voice to the cheering multitude, actually wheeling Red Prince about and riding back in his tracks to first reach the stranger's side.

"You're more of a man than I thought, El Paso!" he cried, heartily, though making no tender of his hand as another might have done. "I'll forgive you the job you set up on me, and confess that mine was to the full as foul."

A rather peculiar apology, after all, but it went far to wipe out the disagreeable impression left in the minds of many of the spectators by his unexpected retaliation, and possibly that was all Riata Rob cared for just then.

It brought back the memory of his own wonderful exploit, and from that moment by far the greater portion of the wildly enthusiastic yelling and cheering was for the Range Champion.

No one was quicker to realize this sudden change than Felix Parry, and it cut his brief triumph short almost before he had fairly begun to taste its sweetness.

He caught the black horse which Owen Taylor had abandoned when summoned to the front by Riata Rob, as described, and leading it to intercept the man from El Paso, who was leisurely walking away from the spot where lay the lifeless silver-tip, like one who cared little to be part of a side show, he fiercely grated:

"Is that devil always to come out on top?"

"It looks a bit that way, don't it, pard?" softly laughed Taylor as he vaulted lightly into the saddle, glancing back toward the eager men, and even women, who were flocking about the slain monster. "One consolation: the fellow deserves to be called champion, so far as his skill and physical courage goes."

"Even you join in singing his praises, then?" Felix frowned, fuming like a restive colt under the collar.

"Just giving the devil his due, dear fellow!" purred the enigma. "You bestowed that title upon him, I believe, Felix?"

Parry growled, but seemed unable to find words at that moment by which he might express at least a portion of the hot chagrin which had fallen to his share that day.

Though without any seeming purpose in so doing, the friends were letting their horses carry them slowly away from the still noisy crowd, not one of whom appeared to remember their existence. Though for the moment Taylor's really brilliant exploit had enthused them, the revulsion came only too swiftly when it was remembered that he had only escaped the pit he had shaped to entrap another.

"I thought we had him sure, with Dun Devil," moodily muttered Felix, his head drooping in bitter dejection. "That only set him up a peg higher with the mob. Then—I felt certain he'd flunk when you sprung the silver-tip on him!"

"Which only lifted him so high above the rest of us that we need glasses even to catch a glimpse of his heels!" laughed Taylor, though with a tinge of bitterness betrayed by his voice.

"But you say you can drag him down into the dust—do it, man!" savagely flashed Parry, his blue eyes all aglow as he confronted the human enigma from El Paso. "Do it—do it right now!"

"You're wild, lad, even to think of such a thing now," was the grave response, as an unsmiling face glanced toward the distant gathering, still wildly enthusiastic over the double victory of their champion. "He's a little tin god on wheels, in the eyes of the crowd. And fitly so, too, for he is a man—in all save honor!"

"Show him up in his true colors, then!"

Owen Taylor shrugged his shoulders, touching his neck gingerly with his fingers, the better to point his meaning.

"And have the gang lynch me, out of hand? Thanks, not any in mine, if you please, pardner!"

"Then tell me what hold you have on him, and I'll do the exposing, too mighty quick!" flashed Felix, all the more eager because of these repeated rebuffs.

But Owen Taylor shook his head in negation. "No; let him strut his brief hour. The blow will fall all the more heavily when it does descend."

"But Sybil—you forget her, man!"

For a single breath that strong face was a picture: hatred, love, despair, all commingled.

"It's just because I can't forget her, man!" he said, almost harshly. "Just now she wouldn't credit aught to his detriment though an angel fresh from heaven should descend to warn her. Yet—only for her, I'd let him run his rope to the end! As it is, we can do nothing more until the festival is over."

CHAPTER XX.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

ALL of this had consumed far more time than has been made allowance for, and the hour appointed for the afternoon lunch had long since passed by. But few regretted that, and nearly every one had to be repeatedly reminded that, after all, one must eat where one works heartily, even though that work consists mainly of sport.

Having worked off a good share of his evil passions, and feeling that he had been able to give his rivals even better than they had sent him, Riata Rob fell into his wonted good humor, proving himself in truth an ornament to the feast, as well as in the lists.

Sybil was almost supremely happy. Her betrothed was no longer in danger. He had won fresh laurels. And she, at least, felt that he had not treated Owen Taylor one whit more harshly than that detestably smiling individual richly deserved.

If she noticed the absence of her brother from the feast, she made no allusion to it, most likely thinking that the spoiled boy deserved a touch of punishment for his mad folly so openly displayed that day.

Jason Runnover actually secured Widow Kate Marlin for his partner, not only for the lunch, but for the opening dance, which would not be delayed much longer, since the sun was already nearing the horizon.

And whether it was his success in winning such a neat sum of good money, or whether he was living again in the repeated triumphs of his only son, a score of years seemed to have fallen from his shoulders, and it was hard to say which contributed most to the general merriment: Widow Kate, or grim old Run-over.

Although this was the second hearty lunch since the opening of the sports, and despite the fact that, when the midnight hour should arrive, a mighty supper was to be attacked, nearly all of that merry gathering ate long and busily. Thanks to their free, out-door life, this would prove hardly a handicap to their already tingling heels.

Preparations for the dance had been to the full as thorough as everything else in connection with the festival, and already there came an odd toot or shrill blast on some wind instrument. For a full "brass band" had been engaged for the occasion. None the less magnificent, either, because of the members being rigged out in full "cowboy" uniform, after the style made famous more recently at a certain magnificent parade, far toward the rising sun.

Lunch fairly over, the more youthful members of the gathering were soon strolling toward the spacious "pavilion" which had been erected for the use of the dancers, far enough away from the cattle-pens and other structures not to be annoyed by sights or sounds or smells that could detract from the enjoyment of the hour.

Here, too, the Western style shone forth after its own fashion.

Long and heavy logs had first been hauled into position, serving as a secure foundation to the flooring, yet leaving it springy as the most agile footer could wish for.

The flooring was of inch planks, firmly nailed into position. A rude but strong dais ran across one end, where the band was to be stationed.

A strong railing ran around the elevated platform, with two openings at each side, and one at the end opposite the band stand. Close to this railing ran board seats, fastened in place, for the use of those who had no mind to dance, or who were crowded out of place temporarily.

At frequent intervals strong timbers stood erect, supporting others which ran parallel with the flooring, with as many cross-pieces as were required to maintain the leafy roof, furnished by the timber island near which the pavilion had been erected.

Each and every upright, beam or stringer was wreathed in fragrant green, brightened by strips of bunting and a liberal sprinkling of flags of almost all sizes.

Taken all in all, the structure was something to be proud of, even though the flooring lacked polish and waxen smoothness, with here and there a failure to perfectly match through plank of unequal thickness.

Such the stage; as for the characters who were to play their different parts upon it, many of them have already been introduced.

Like everything else pertaining to the great semi-annual festival, there was a certain routine to be observed until after the "first set" was brought to a successful conclusion.

First on the programme came the regulation "quadrille," as it was popularly known, with its four couples forming as many sides of a square; and equally of course the Queen of the Range and the Champion were to take the head of the "first set."

After this set was filled, with other couples chosen according to their social rank or special proficiency in understanding "the figures," the remaining space would be filled with as many sets as could find room to maneuver, each man drawing a number which would insure him a fair share of the rare amusement, the lowest numbers having the first chance, then falling to the rear while others less lucky should take their turns.

All of this was fully understood by every person present, thanks to the festivals which had preceded this one; but everything must go according to rule, and the chief judge elaborately announced his programme from his station on the band-stand.

As he himself was too old to dance, or too stiff, rather, thanks to a leaden memento which he carried as a gentle reminder of the civil war, the fourth place in the first set was awarded to Jason Runnover, not alone because he was one of the richest graziers in that section, but as a compliment to him for having given the Range such a glorious champion.

"Sure, man, but if the dear judge wasn't so mighty particular in describing my partner, I'd simply shut the two eyes o' me and make a blind guess whether or no I had father or son, faith!" laughed Widow Kate Malin, now entirely in her element.

"There's not a ghost of a doubt about your having the father for a partner—for life, too, if you'll honor me so far, madam," gravely declared Run-over, bowing low, hand over his heart.

"Ah, ye wicked man!" and her fan rose from where it hung at her girdle, to coquetishly hide her blushes. "Before the whole crowd of them, too!"

"Before the nearest preacher, even more boldly, madam!" heroically affirmed the grim old rancher, with naught in face, manner or voice to show that he was not entirely in earnest.

"Whisht, man, dear!" came in a stage whisper, as her laughing eyes flashed over the amused gathering. "Would ye have the girls all flying in the face o' me? And me wid—K'ape the saacet on yer life, honey, dear! And me wid my best false front on the head o' me this howly minute?"

The leading set was all arranged, and the band, its leader with revolver for baton, was only awaiting the completion of other sets before giving the opening signal.

Sybil, proud and happy, her lovely face flushed just enough to render her facial charms perfection itself, her eyes beaming brightly, was leaning lightly on the arm of her handsome lover. Already her little feet were moving as if to inaudible music, and her vague yet none the less troubling forebodings of the earlier hours entirely forgotten.

And even when her earthly pleasures seemed most complete and unalloyed, the bolt was falling from out the blue!

All at once the brief silence which fell over all when the different sets were at last completely filled, and the leader of the band was utting his revolver to give the signal for the dance to begin, a sharp, wailing cry floated

through the night, sending curious shiver over many a superstitious one who caught its notes.

Almost simultaneously with this sobbing cry, a figure sprang upon the pavilion at one of the side entrances, flitting swiftly along and parting Jason Runnover and Widow Kate as it broke into the head set, to fairly confront Sybil Parry and Riata Rob.

The figure of a woman, simply, even rudely garbed, with bare head and unconfined hair, black as raven's wing and floating down past her waist. Of a woman, though in years she seemed little more than a child, for in her outstretched arms she bore a little child.

"Ruperto—see!" she cried, her eyes fairly ablaze, her voice so choked as to leave her meaning hardly clear even to those nearest by.

She thrust the child fairly into the arms of the Range Champion, which mechanically closed to save the babe a dangerous fall as the woman recoiled a pace, her clasped hands flying to her heart and pressing her bosom almost savagely as she cried aloud:

"Ruperto Ramon, you have robbed me of all else—take him, too—our little boy!"

And though its lips pouted in fear, the little fellow lisped:

"Papa!"

CHAPTER XXI

PEPITA'S PLEA.

Not until that instant did any among the surprised gathering seem to comprehend how much that strange and unanticipated intrusion might mean, but now fully as many eyes were turned toward the little child as still lingered on the figure or face of the woman.

His face was upturned, his little hands held out as though ready to clasp about the neck of him whom he called by that endearing title; but even his innocence took fright at that ghastly pale countenance, and shrinking back it whimpered:

"Papa—mamma—Robbie 'fraid!"

"See, Roberto!" cried the woman, with a curious sobbing catch in her musical voice, her trembling hands reaching out, more to the man than the child. "Our noble boy! Do you hear? He knows you—even though I taught him those words as his first, he knows his father without—guided by heavenly instinct!"

"Guided by the devil!" hoarsely uttered Riata Rob, the hot blood flooding his face for an instant, turning his skin almost purple as he rudely thrust the child from his breast, to which it was clinging now.

"No, no! do not curse—do not put the evil eye upon the babe—our child, Roberto Ramon!" almost screamed the woman.

"What the deuce do you mean by our— Take the kid, or I'll break its neck—as I swear to break the back of this hellish trick and that of the cowardly schemer along with it!" hoarsely cried Riata Rob, his face turning pale as that of a corpse as he caught the growing buzz that started among the gathering, none could say just where.

The child cried out in affright as his rough hands tore its hold loose, and for an instant it seemed as though the maddened champion was about to put his savage threat into execution. He held the boy up in air, but with maternal instinct reviving, the woman sprang forward to catch the infant ere it fell.

"Mad—mad—your papa is mad, little one!" she sobbed, hushing the babe as it hid its face in her bosom. "Roberto—husband!"

Riata Rob was glaring around with blazing eyes, as though he hoped to discover the prime author of this diabolical plot to ruin him in the very moment of his crowning triumph.

But, though he saw many wondering and a few suspicious faces, none of them appeared to be actually guilty. And he saw more: that he was granted far more space than at first, just as though people had already condemned him, and feared contamination in his mere proximity.

Up to this moment he had not once given a thought to Sybil Parry or how he would receive such a shock; but as he saw, right or wrong, others shrinking from him, he tried to turn toward his fair partner, a sickening fear seeming to close upon and paralyze his heart.

It was then that the wild-eyed woman made her fresh appeal, and choking back the fierce oath that rose in his throat, Riata Rob glared first at her, then around as though in quest of her friends or backers.

"Who is this crazy fool? Take her away, or I'll do her harm! Take her away and stand a man up in her place if you dare!"

"Who is she? Where did she come from? Who ever saw her before? Who brought her here, anyway?"

A score or more eager voices united in pouring forth these questions, and the stranger seemed frightened by all those curious eyes bent upon her with such burning interest. She shrunk away, clasping the sobbing infant tightly to her swelling bosom, a hunted light coming into her own eyes as they flashed swiftly around; to stop short when they came back to the ghastly pale face of the Range Champion.

That seemed to lend her renewed courage, for

no longer shrinking from the crowd, but with something of conscious power in both face and tones, she cried out sharply:

"Who am I, do they ask, Roberto? Tell them—speak up like the honest gentleman I used to know, and tell them it is Pepita Ramon, your true and loving wife!"

"You lie, curse you!" hoarsely gasped Riata Rob, actually shrinking back a pace as the woman moved still closer.

"Roberto—don't!" panted the woman, shivering much as she might had one of his savagely-clinched hands fallen upon her person in an actual blow. "'Tis I—the mother of your baby boy! See, my love!" as she forced the frightened child to lift its head and look toward the man whom she was driving to utter desperation before all that crowd of neighbors and friends. "He knows you, just because my true love hath so often whispered of his father—just through my loving description of the only man all this wide world holds for me! See! who is it, Robbie, lad? Who is the pretty gentleman?"

"Papa—me 'fraid—go by-by!"

Riata Rob caught his breath sharply, shrinking back until the railing about the dais lent him support. Again he cast a swift glance around, to note growing doubts and suspicion on many a formerly friendly face.

And as he turned in his desperation, he saw that Sybil, too, had recoiled from him!

"The little darlint!" ejaculated Widow Kate Malin, who had up to that moment kept silence through sheer amazement. "I wish I was a man me own self, just so I could be blamed wid the fathering o' such an angelic b'y—faith I do, now!"

"Robert—son!" sternly cried Jason Runnover, though without making any forward movement. "Head up and face to the front, if you be the honest lad I've always thought you!"

That grim appeal was sufficient to rally the half-stupefied young man, and giving his head a toss, his chest a mighty expansion, Riata Rob stood proudly erect, flashing defiance over all before him.

"What can I do or say, when only a mad-woman faces me?"

Pepita broke in with a sharp cry of mingled pain and anger, her darkly beautiful face flushing hotly, her black eyes all aglow, yet with more of love than aught else ringing in her notes as she cried:

"What can you say, Roberto? The truth—God's own truth, my love, my hero! Tell them all—tell them that I am Pepita, your once-loved bride! Tell them how you won my maiden heart. Tell them I am really your wife, made so by solemn vows, by sighs and tears, by the sacred words of the holy padre himself!"

Whiter than ever grew that face as he looked over her head to the deeply interested gathering beyond. Was his the quiet of conscious guilt? Had he surrendered, or was he but gathering strength for yet another desperate effort to break the cruel toils which were surely closing about him?

"Who is this crazy fool?" he hoarsely asked, only to have Pepita cut him short with a sharp cry of angry pain.

"Your wife—the mother of your child, Roberto Ramon!"

Riata Rob faced her, his own countenance full of fierce rage and bitter hatred, as it seemed to all who caught that look.

"If you were a man and dared utter such an infernal lie I'd kill you like a dog! I'd tear out that lying tongue and thrust—"

Pepita sprang forward and sharply drew a hand across his livid lips, the touch of tigress in her blood coming to the surface and betraying itself in that blow. Yet her anger made her face seem even more beautiful, for it drove away that weary, haggard look born of long grief and wearing toil.

"Who am I, then, Roberto Ramon?"

"A mad woman—or even worse!"

With a sobbing catch of her breath Pepita shrunk back, shivering as though with the sharp pain of an undeserved blow from a loved hand.

She cast an unsteady look around, shrinking from those curious eyes, and in her pitiful despair making one more attempt to win a kind word or look of recognition from the man whom she claimed as her husband and the father of her babe. She moved closer to him as though unconsciously, her voice husky, yet full of a certain sweetness, overflowing with pitiful pathos.

"Roberto, what makes them look so strangely? Why do they laugh and point this way, as though I was— Come, love, my husband! It is all an ugly dream—a hideous nightmare from which I'll awaken you with warm kisses, even as I used to do when—"

"If the mad fool has any friends present, take her away before I do her harm!" harshly uttered the Range Champion, putting both hands behind his back and locking his fingers the better to resist that awful temptation.

"Yes, away, Roberto!" sobbed Pepita, seemingly only catching that one word with its meaning as interpreted by her heart. "It has been a hideous dream, but we will waken—and once more you will be my lover, my kind husband!"

"And—see, Roberto!" as she forced a laugh that sounded more pitiful than even her undisguised grief, holding up the wide-eyed babe before the face of the one whom she claimed as its father. "Our child, whom you never saw since—he can talk, now, Roberto! He can—say who the fine gentleman is, baby!"

"Papa!"

"See! he knows—he is so bright and—"

Riata Rob flung out a hand from which Pepita instinctively shrunk, cutting her tremblingly exultant speech short in his cold rage.

"Who put you up to this, woman? Who helped you to hatch this infernally foul lie? Tell me his name—give me a sign by which I may know the cowardly cur—show me a way to get at the real head of this dirty trick, or I'll kill you in his place!"

With a choking sob Pepita caught his arm, only to be flung off as though her lightest touch was poison to him. Flung aside with a force that caused her to stagger and almost fall, only steadying herself as she brought up face to face with Sybil Parry.

The eyes of the two women met, and a startling change came over the stranger who claimed the man as a husband who was publicly pledged to marry that fair girl.

She no longer trembled. Her slight, short figure seemed to dilate and to grow in altitude. Her black eyes fairly blazed, and as Sybil instinctively shrunk back, Pepita pressed still closer, holding up her baby boy until its face was almost touching that of the bewildered and half-distracted maiden.

"Give him back to me, lady—my Roberto! You have so much—I so little, even at the best! Once I was rich—so rich! I had both husband and child! Now—you have stolen away my lover, my king, leaving me only a broken heart and—our child!"

"See!" she cried, half-fiercely, thrusting the sobbing infant still closer to that ghastly pale face. "Am I mad? Am I lying? Look at the babe—is it not *his* eyes, *his* face, *his* image?"

Riata Rob leaned back against the railing, for the moment literally helpless to speak or to act. The blow had fallen without the slightest warning, striking him down in the very height of his triumph, just when he was the idol of the gathering, just when he had triumphed over all his bitterest enemies.

For once he knew not what to do, how to act. And though he could not help seeing that this fresh appeal was worse than torture to the pure-hearted girl who had given him her first love, he knew not how to interfere without making bad matters still worse.

And poor Sybil, forced to look into that innocent, tear-marked face, was forced also to recognize the bitter truth of what the woman said: those were, indeed, the gray eyes of Robert Runnover; that his face, so far as the face of a babe could resemble that of a man!

Others saw the startling resemblance as well, and as the murmur broke forth, Riata Rob sprang forward to interpose; but another leaped before him, uttering a fierce oath. And then Felix Parry smote him on first one cheek, then on the other, with open hand!

CHAPTER XXII.

DRIVEN TO DESPAIR.

ALL this transpired without a moment's warning, for until he made that swift leap into the bright light—until his heavy hand sharply smote the Range Champion on each cheek in swift succession—nothing had been seen of Felix Parry since the little Mexican woman first put in an appearance.

Riata Rob staggered under those blows, a hoarse cry escaping his lips. Felix Parry sprang back a pace, whipping forth a revolver. And with cries of wondering alarm, many of the spectators flinched, dodging to escape danger even before powder began to burn.

But the instant he recognized his assailant, Riata Rob recovered his usual nerve, and with a catlike bound was upon the infuriated young ranchero, grappling with his armed hand, wresting the revolver from his fingers undischarged, then hurling the dangerous tool far away into the darkness which reigned beyond the candle-light.

"I'll kill you, dog!" gasped Felix, struggling fiercely but vainly in that grasp, his second hand caught even as it sought to strike that pale face.

"Stand back, all!" cried Riata Rob, sharply, at the same time forcing the arms of his adversary up and back, to finally pinion them behind his back, holding Felix helpless as an infant despite his furious struggles to free himself.

"You are her brother, Felix Parry, and as such your life is sacred in my eyes, even though I may bear the brand of your fingers through life," he said, his tones hard and cold, but betraying no especial hatred for the one who had so publicly disgraced him. "I could kill you. In my hand you are little better than a child, as in my eyes you are but a headstrong boy, misled by evil counsel. I tell you this, not so much to humiliate you, but to let all others see that I could defend myself if I saw fit to do so."

"Let up—I'll kill you for bringing shame upon my—"

"Stop!" with fierce emphasis that cut the mad youth short despite himself. "You and me are enough; don't bring in other names. Now—keep your threats if you care to do so. I shall neither guard nor strike."

Riata Rob released Felix, stepping back a pace, folding his arms over his heaving bosom, his face white as chalk, but without a line of fear to be traced upon it.

But before Felix Parry could draw another weapon, even if he was mad enough to assault an unarmed man after those words, Pepita sprang between the two men, flashing a wicked-looking knife in the young rancher's face as she shrilly panted:

"Harm a hair of his dear head, and I'll kill you! He is my husband—the father of my innocent babe!"

"Oh, the pity of it all!" sobbed Widow Kate Malin, springing forward to snatch up the wailing infant from where it lay on the floor, dropped there by Pepita as she sprang to the rescue of the man whom her wild claims were driving well-nigh distracted. "The swate little gosssoon! Av it wor ownly mine—ow-wow! the pity of it all, sure!"

Felix Parry shrunk visibly from before that little tiger-cat, for he saw death in her blazing eyes if he should persist in attempting the life of the man whom she was defending.

"Take him away, then, or I'll kill him if it was the last act of my life—the doubly perjured cur!"

"Smite those lying lips, Robert Runnover!" harshly cried his father, fairly livid with rage, a bony hand quivering as it pointed toward the heir to Good Luck Ranch. "Will you let him run on? Must I, the old and broken-down man, teach you your duty? Then—"

"Hold, father!" sharply interposed Riata Rob, with a fierce tone such as he had never before used in addressing his parent. "I'll get at the bottom facts in this foul conspiracy if you give me time. It's my duty, and by all the fiends! I'll make it my pleasure, too!"

"All right," with a short, hard laugh, as he produced a revolver from about his person, flashing a defiant look around as he added: "And I'll see that you have a clear field—we ask no favor!"

Sybil uttered a low, pained cry, but her father was now at her side, and his arms held her back as she would have sprung forward.

None other offered to interfere. It was a painful matter, at best, and however much they might wish it well and safely over, no one knew just how to bring that end about.

Without giving another glance or thought to Felix Parry, who stood near by, hand nervously fumbling at the butt of his second revolver, Riata Rob faced Pepita, who, now that death no longer menaced him, began to shrink away from his fiercely glittering gaze.

"Roberto—I did not—could I see you cruelly butchered?" she panted, tremblingly, love and fear strangely mingled in her face, her eyes, her musical voice.

Twice Riata Rob attempted to speak, and as often something rising in his throat seemed to choke him. It was his mad passions, no doubt, but he resolved to conquer them for the time being, and not to speak until he could find the words he sought for.

On the third attempt he succeeded, his tones hard and even, though so harsh and unnatural that his nearest friend could not have recognized him in the speaker but for the aid of eyesight.

"For the last time I ask you, woman: Who and what are you?"

"Pepita Ramon—your true and loving wife, Roberto!"

"Still that worse than foolish lie? Who hatched this vile plot and set you to carry it out? Tell me his name, or the punishment he so richly deserves may fall upon *your* head. Tell me the truth—and be sure I'll shame the devil afterwards!"

Riata Rob laughed at that grim conceit, but it was a token of mirth even more bitter and to be feared than his undisguised anger.

Pepita was frightened, shrinking back, but Riata Rob mercilessly followed her up, harshly demanding:

"Must I actually tear his name from your lying lips, woman? Who was it, I ask you once more?"

"Roberto, I don't— You frighten me, husband!"

"Was it Felix Parry? Was it Owen Taylor?"

"What names are they? I know them not!" cried Pepita Ramon, rallying, her black eyes winning a new light as she faced the Range Champion unflinchingly once more. "What brought me all this weary way from our sunny home, do you ask? My love for thee—what else? Ay! there was one thing more," her voice growing softer, her dark eyes flashing around as though seeking the helpless one brought back to her mind by the words shaping themselves on her tongue. "My little babe cried for his father, Roberto!"

"Then why don't you take child to father?"

Why come here to drive me worse than mad?" fiercely, yet coldly retorted Riata Rob.

"Where else should I go? Whom else should I seek? Oh, Roberto, my love!" clasping her hands and holding them up as though to add a prayer to her pleading, hot tears streaming down her olive cheeks. "Am I forever too late? Has your love for Pepita indeed died away?"

Her trembling hands flew out with the last words, but before they could touch his person, much less clasp about his neck as they were intended, Riata Rob struck them down with merciless promptness, a short, bitter laugh parting his lips before the words:

"Love! I love you? Why, woman, from what little I have seen of you this night, you're a creature fit only for loathing, hatred, curses black and foul as the lie you are so boldly and shamelessly playing before the only woman I ever loved—before all these, once my friends, but now—my bitterest enemies, if they place any dependence in your baseless claims!"

"You mean—you deny that I am your lawful wife, Roberto Ramon?" panted Pepita, shrinking away, yet at the same time seemingly drawn a little closer to the man who so bitterly denounced her and her claims.

"I only wish you were—for one sweet minute!" flashed Riata Rob. "That would be long enough, for it would give me the right to tear the truth from your falsifying tongue—to win the name of the devil who has set you, a shameless tool, to working my eternal ruin!"

With a panting cry, Pepita flashed forth the same knife with which she had menaced Felix Parry, but Riata Rob seemed to invite its length, rather than flinch from its point, tearing open his bosom as he cried:

"Strike, and complete your vile work, woman! You've already done worse than kill me, for you've killed my future, killed her love—God above! you've killed her, too!" as Sybil gave a choking cry as she saw the life of her lover menaced by that glittering blade, then sunk into the arms of her agitated father, senseless.

"Roberto—I strike—not your dear heart, but mine!" sobbed Pepita, as she drove the cruel blade deep into her own bosom, then fell heavily across the feet of the man who had repudiated her so bitterly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW THE FESTIVAL ENDED.

THE desperate deed was so quickly done, the despairing blow so swiftly delivered, that interference was impossible.

Even when Pepita dropped at Riata Rob's feet, few were there who fully realized what had been done, but of those few the Range Champion was one.

He shrunk back a bit, with a hoarse, choking cry, then hastily bent forward and caught at the fatal weapon, plucking it from its living sheath, just as Widow Kate Malin sprang forward. She struck his arms away, unwittingly crossing them so that the keen blade was forced against the back of his left hand, cutting a slit from which the hot blood flowed.

"Back! touch her not, Rob Run-over!" cried the widow, almost choking with indignation and pity combined. "Go hide your beguiling eyes and soothing tongue—may God forgive ye for being a murdering scoundrel!"

Riata Rob staggered back until the railing checked him, more from that passionate outburst than through the might of Widow Kate's arm, powerful though that had shown itself.

He lifted a hand to brush across his eyes, but the motion brought that blood-stained weapon before them, and with a choking cry he hurled the knife far away through the night.

Widow Kate was kneeling beside the poor woman, lifting her head and supporting her yielding body against her breast, unheeding the blood that trickled over her own holiday finery, trying to stanch the hemorrhage, making a crooning sound such as might have come from a mother's lips over an injured child.

Ugly sounds came from the excited crowd, and though no one actually denounced Riata Rob, or made a step toward putting him under bonds, one must have been both dumb and blind not to have seen how fatally the tide was turning against the Range Champion.

Even grim old Run-over himself seemed paralyzed by the unfortunate turn matters had taken, staring like one dazed at the widow and her seemingly dying charge.

Riata Rob turned in the direction where he had last seen Sybil Parry, as though confident that here at least he would find one true and trusting friend. But the poor girl had swooned at sight of his peril, and now hung limply across the left arm of her father, with Felix coming to his assistance.

The Good Luck ranchero was strongly agitated, his honest face far paler than it had been in the memory of man, but that he, too, shared the general prejudice against Riata Rob, in part, at least, was made only too clear by his words and actions.

"Back—keep back, Robert Runnover!" he hoarsely cried, lifting his right hand and menacing the young ranchero with a revolver.

"Kill the murdering cur!" gratingly cried Felix, relieving his father of Sybil's weight.

"Keep away, I warn you, Robert Runnoyer!" was the repeated warning, clearer, harsher than the first. "I'll shoot you like a wolf if you dare come any nearer!"

"As high Heaven hears me, sir, I am guiltless!" panted the young man, seeming to feel this repulse far more bitterly than all that had gone before.

"Prove it so, and no one will be gladder than I will. But until then—keep away from me and mine!"

"Tell the pompous old ass to go to the devil and shake himself, Rob!" cried Jason Runnoyer, rallying and striding forward to take a bold stand alongside his son, pistols in hand and ready for use. "Who are they to crow in such a religious strain? Who but—"

Riata Rob clapped a restraining hand on the grim old fellow's arm, forcing down the half-lifted pistol, his own tones harsh and even commanding as he cried:

"Steady, sir! I'll never call you father again if you quarrel with them now. God above!" and a hand struck his forehead with almost savage force. "Aren't matters bad enough as they stand, without your making them still worse for me?"

Jason Runnoyer dropped his pistol-hand, but though he yielded so far, he was not wholly subdued or won over.

"Is it your fault that a crazy wench—"

"Be still, ye old sinner, ye!" flashed Widow Kate, turning upon Run-over a look that might almost have scorched his hide. "And the poor craythure dyin' in the arrums av me this howly minnit!"

Riata Rob looked that way for an instant, then a partly-smothered groan came through his lips as he turned unsteadily away, grasping the railing as though he felt its need to steady his steps.

Jason Runnoyer was following him, but Riata Rob turned and waved him back with an almost fierce gesture, hoarsely saying:

"Don't crowd—fresh air, or I'll go crazy myself!"

"The whole of out-doors if you ask it, lad!" cried Jason Runnoyer as he wheeled to defy the entire gathering if need be. "To the front, Run-over! Steady, but sure!"

Without waiting to see how this call was answered, Riata Rob bent his head and passed under the railing, leaping to the ground and passing out of sight amidst the shadows cast by the not distant timber.

There came a surge in that direction as though the crowd would break into mad chase, but the movement was almost purely instinctive. The same curious impulse may be noted any day, where one of a kind takes to flight, only to have all others of like nature or race start in hot pursuit, without knowing the merits of the case, or stopping to find out the reason why.

"Back, or 'ware teeth, gentlemen!" shrilly cried Jason Runnoyer, his armed hands rising, his gray eyes flashing fire over the leveled tubes that, by swinging from side to side, seemed to have the power of covering a dozen men at one and the same time.

Already his rallying cry was bringing forth fruits, and sturdy cowboys, none the less dangerous from being in holiday attire, seemed to spring up on either hand as by magic, forming a line which nothing but death could have broken by force.

Following the same blind impulse, the mass recoiled, women beginning to scream and sob and try to get clear of the jam, while men called aloud for order, and others warned the Run-overites not to fire.

"There's no need—no one wants to crowd Riata Rob!" declared one of the gentlemen who had served as judge that day.

"I only wish some one would try it on!" retorted the grim old rancher, his fighting blood now fairly roused, his blazing eyes singling out Owen Taylor, who had hardly been seen, much less heard, all that time. "Maybe you'd like to set the ball to rolling, El Paso?"

Owen Taylor never even turned his eyes in that direction, but pressed on until at the side of Felix Parry and his father, both of whom were busy caring for the still unconscious Sybil.

Widow Kate was still the center of a cleared space, doing what lay in her power for the wounded woman while waiting for the coming of the doctor.

The little child who had played an unwitting part in the dramatic scene was wailing bitterly as it struggled against the stranger arms that had lent it succor for the time being.

"Howld him tinderly, ma'am!" cried Widow Kate, her anxieties seemingly divided between mother and child. "The pity av it all! An' him the very moral av—Will that blissed docthor niver come?"

"Make way, ladies and gentlemen!" just then came the voice of Dr. Beeman, one of the excited crowd having summoned him from the fragments of the recent feast—and bottles.

There was a glassy stare in his blue eyes, a croaking in his voice, a warm flush on his face, all of which, with his air of dignity and his slow, high-stepping, plainly bore evidence that

the greater portion of his time had been given to the bottles and their ardent contents; but it had passed into a by-word that Dr. Beeman was not Dr. Beeman unless Dr. Beeman was at least three-fourths intoxicated.

It actually seemed that he could not do himself justice unless fairly well under the influence of liquor, and so well was this known throughout that range that on one occasion when a sturdy rancher lay very low with a bullet in his lungs, the wounded man bluntly refused to let the doctor touch him—because he came to his assistance perfectly sober!

And when he was told as much, Dr. John Beeman at once sat down to a decanter of whisky, drinking like a fish until the critical patient declared himself satisfied with his physical condition. Then Dr. Beeman fell to work and cured the man!

All this by way of explaining why Widow Kate Malin looked up so anxiously into the physician's face as he pressed through the crowd and gained her side. And why, with a great sigh of relief, she cried:

"Not too full, but just full enough! Do yer-self proud, now, docthor, dear! Save the weenty girleen, and it's Widow Kate'll niver give over singing the praises av good whisky an' your own self—no she won't, man, dear!"

Thus set at liberty for a time, Widow Kate quickly found her foreman, John Morgan, and set him to work preparing means for transporting Pepita and her infant to the Gridiron, then hurried back to lend Dr. Beeman such aid as she could.

His face was very grave, though he was always a little inclined to look owl-like when under the influence of liquor. He shook his head, uttering a few words in a tone too low for other ears than Widow Kate's to catch their full import; but a whisper swiftly spread that the unknown woman who had so unexpectedly blasted all the hopes so long cherished of a glorious dance to wind up the festival with, was dying.

Whether or no this was true, Dr. Beeman made no effort to care for Pepita's injury on the spot, beyond temporarily bandaging it to check the flow of blood, he and the widow standing guard over her until John Morgan came with his cowboys to bear the poor sufferer to the litter which had been hastily prepared for her transportation to Widow Kate's own home.

While this was going on, and while Jason Runnoyer with his band of sturdy henchmen was guarding the point where Riata Rob had staggered away from the pavilion, the relatives of Sybil Parry, ably aided by Owen Taylor, were restoring her to consciousness.

To keep from being crowded, they had carried the maiden up on the dais, vacated by the band at the half-distracted father's request. And when they had succeeded, and Sybil lifted her head with opening eyes and returning consciousness, her first cry was for the lover in whose honor and truth she alone seemed to retain perfect faith.

"Robert—my lover! Where are you? What have—Not killed!" with an hysterical cry as something of that terrible scene came back to her whirling brain. "Don't tell me I have lost him forever!"

"He's worse than dead!" harshly uttered Felix Parry, making a signal that caused the Good Luck cowboys to close in about them. "If he dares show his face, boys, make my words good! I'll be your justifier!"

With his father's aid—for though Owen Taylor bore them company, he dared not lend a hand after Sybil shrunk from his touch with a moan and shudder of bitter aversion—Felix bore Sybil off the dais by the rear entrance, and quickly the sound of their horses' hoofs came echoing back to the pavilion, while at nearly the same moment Pepita Ramon and her child were carried away by Widow Kate Malin and her men.

Through all this Jason Runnoyer had grimly stood guard, striving to hide his growing anxiety concerning his absent son. But now he was on the point of starting out in search of him, when Riata Rob came back, his face showing white and hard-set in the flaring lights.

CHAPTER XXIV.

RIATA ROB IN A NEW LIGHT.

PUSHING two of the cowboys aside, he sprang upon the platform, casting his keen, gray eyes over the scene, now thinned by the departure of so many persons, though the floor was still fairly well filled.

As though involuntarily he lifted a hand—his left—to sweep it before the eyes that failed to discover what he sought, and, for the first time noticing the blood marks, Jason Runnoyer caught his arm with a sharp cry.

"You're hurt, lad! Who cut you? Let me—"

But with a harsh ejaculation Riata Rob flung off his hand, his face seeming to turn even paler than before, as he demanded:

"Where are they? Where's Sybil—and Pepita?"

"Gone—and may the devil's good will bear

them company, too!" harshly laughed Jason Runnoyer, his pent-up hatred breaking bonds at last. "Let them go, lad! Surely they've worked you harm enough for one night!"

"Who took her—Pepita?"

"Irish Kate—the vixen!"

Riata Rob brushed that bleeding hand across his brows, a hand dropping as though unconsciously to his waist as he again swept the thinning crowd with his eyes, now glittering like twin orbs of polished steel. Jason Runnoyer seemed to divine his thoughts by instinct, and, with a repetition of that hard laugh, he said:

"He's gone, too, lad! But there's a morrow coming!"

"Ay, to-morrow!" almost savagely cried the Range Champion, his recently-won medal glittering brightly over his heart as he moved. "And maybe to-morrow we'll see blood flowing more freely than this!"

He laughed bitterly as he lifted his wounded hand, shaking from it the drops of half-clotted blood, then roughly knotting a handkerchief about the injured member.

By this time nearly all of the women had vanished from the scene, and, as their escorts bore them company, the pavilion was rapidly growing deserted, though a few disappointed swains or cowboys lingered, loth to believe that the dance was a thing of the past, so far as that occasion was concerned.

Somehow the tragic ending of poor Pepita's despairing plea had robbed nearly every woman at the gathering of any desire to carry out their merry promises, and to many it would have seemed sacrilege to even think of dancing on the same floor stained with her life-blood.

Dark frowns and cold glances followed Riata Rob wherever he went, and men gave way for his passage, more through dislike than fear. He must have realized as much, for his demeanor grew more and more defiant and overbearing, until Jason Runnoyer won his consent to leave the pavilion and return to Run-over Ranch for the night.

Billy Black brought his young master's horse, and leaping into the saddle, Riata Rob used his keen spurs viciously, sending Red Prince forward with a wild snort and a bound that would have unseated a less accomplished rider.

It was not until nearly half the distance to Run-over Ranch was covered, that Jason Runnoyer could overtake his son, despite his liberal use of both spurs and quirt on his spirited charger. But then, seemingly having worked off a bit of his mad fever, Riata Rob was content to proceed after a more orderly fashion.

Jason Runnoyer attempted to engage his son in conversation, but after several gruff rebuffs, he accepted the situation, and the ride was completed in almost utter silence.

Contrary to his usual custom, Riata Rob left his horse to the care of Billy Black, seemingly having lost all regard for the noble creature, without whom he could hardly have won such honor that day.

"It's all 'long o' the wimmen—durn 'em!" growled the cowboy, as he led Red Prince away. "Leastwise, all but Miss Sybil!"

Father and son entered the ranch, Riata Rob dropping heavily into the first seat he came to, leaving his father to light up. But when this was done, the younger man started to his feet, calling for liquor.

"I'm burning up with thirst!" he declared, laughing harshly as his father gazed curiously into his face. "Does that open your eyes, dear sir? Well," flinging his hat across the room and moving a chair closer to the table on which Jason Runnoyer hastened to place food and liquor, "if I don't open them still wider this night, then it's because the hungry devil inside o' me will be satisfied with meat and drink alone!"

"What's come over you, lad?" asked Jason Runnoyer, leaning both hands on the edge of the table and frowning a bit as he noted that darkly flushed face. "You've been drinking? You, who almost preached at me for touching what you called liquid damnation?"

"When the devil was ill—You know the rest! If I haven't been ill, I've been worse!"

Jason Runnoyer closed his lips tightly, then drew a seat to the table and made a fair pretense at eating and drinking to keep his son company. But all the time he was watching, wondering, trying in vain to fully comprehend this amazing change which had so suddenly come over the son he thought he knew so well.

Riata Rob ate and drank like one who had fasted for a week, paying no attention to those curious, troubled glances, though he could hardly have escaped noticing them. That he had read their meaning aright was quickly proven when his appetite was satisfied, for refilling his glass he said, coldly sneering:

"Puzzled it out yet, father?"

"What has come over you, lad?" earnestly asked Run-over. "Surely you're not going to let that ugly—what that crazy wench said to-night—throw you completely off your balance?"

"To-morrow I'll wear the same old mask, father, but now—the devil is fairly awakened, and calls mighty loud for a show! It may come a bit hard on you, having the wool pulled so

abruptly from over your eyes, but what's a father good for if he can't humor his only son and heir once in a long while?"

The bottle was empty, but Jason Runnoyer rose without a word and brought forth a large decanter, together with a box of choice cigars.

There was a hard, stern light in his eyes, and his set features betrayed the effort it cost him to maintain that quietude.

He filled both glasses, took a cigar and pushed the box across to Riata Rob, who followed his example. Not until the blue smoke was curling about both their heads did either break the silence which had fallen over them.

"Poor girl!" with almost a sigh in his tones. "Hard lines on the little woman, father!"

"Doctor Beeman was just drunk enough to do his best work," was the curt response. "You seem to think more about her than of Parry's girl—how comes that, Robert?"

"Maybe because I was wondering whether Sybil would have stabbed herself rather than let me leave her!" nodded Riata Rob, a gloomy scowl disfiguring his handsome face.

"It doesn't run in the breed!" sneered Runover, never missing a fair chance to hint at the dislike which he entertained toward his neighboring grazier. "She might howl and—"

"Touch lightly, please!" warned Riata Rob, with another nod. "Don't forget that you are speaking of the lady who is to become my wife in less than a week, father."

"Will she?" bluntly asked Runover, his keen eyes fixed on the flushed face of his son. "After what happened this evening?"

"I hold her promise; I'll hold her to that pledge, though the earth crack open and the heavens fall!" flashed the Range Champion, striking the table before him with his clinched fist.

"If she consents to be so held, without first coming to a clear and complete understanding with you as to what all this black work means then she's worse than even I ever thought of the breed! And that is needless!"

"You mean about Pepita and the kid?" hesitated Riata Rob, his eyes drooping after a swift look into that hard face opposite.

"What else can I mean? And—you've got that name down mighty pat, for a lad who never heard of its owner before this very evening, Robert!" he said, strong suspicion in his voice and manner. "Is this the first time you ever met the woman?"

"Well—hardly!" forcing a reckless laugh that did not entirely cover his embarrassment. "I met her down El Paso way, last year."

Jason Runnoyer turned a shade paler, and the hard lines about his mouth grew harder as he listened to this dangerous admission.

"But you're not—she isn't—" he began, only to be cut short by a reckless laugh from Riata Rob.

"I'm not so mighty sure, either way. She thinks so. The priest mumbled something over us, but I was a bit too drunk at the time to think of asking just how much his gibberish really meant!"

CHAPTER XXV.

OWEN TAYLOR BEARS WITNESS.

NOT until she was fairly in the saddle and well started on the long ride to Good Luck Ranch, father on one side and brother on the other, with a goodly escort of cowboys to guard against unwelcome intrusion, did Sybil Parry entirely give over her vain efforts to give Riata Rob at least another opportunity for explaining away those dreadful charges brought against him by—she certainly *was* a mad woman!

"Brace up, sis, and have some style about you!" impatiently said Felix, his restraining hand giving her arm a shake that had something of viciousness in it. "Do you want to make a holy show of yourself for the whole range to chuckle over?"

"Go away—I almost hate you to-night!" Sybil cried, almost fiercely as she shook off his grasp and leaned far off to the other side. "You are at the bottom of this—you and your cruel friend, with his hollow, treacherous smile! May Heaven forgive you both—I never can!"

Yet this outburst of natural feeling served a good purpose, for Sybil no longer sobbed and pleaded; her physical weakness seemed to vanish, and rejecting all support or aid from even her father, she rode on through the star-lit night in silence.

Owen Taylor kept the party company, but he kept silence even more closely, refusing to speak even when Felix Parry, dropping back from the side of his sister, addressed some questions to him. A grim nod, or silent shake of the head was all, and Felix was forced to be content with those, though he showed a bit of his ugly temper when he growled:

"That's all right just now, pard, but the time's coming, and mighty nigh got here, too, when you've got to speak—speak out plain at that, without a muffler on your tongue or blinkers over the eyes o' ye!"

When Good Luck Ranch was reached, at last, Sybil permitted her father to lift her from the saddle, leaning heavily on his shoulders for a single breath, visibly shivering as he soothingly slipped an arm about her waist.

"Trust in daddy, little girl," he huskily muttered, his lips brushing her ear. "If he can't bring it out all right, at least he'll see that this bitter insult is thoroughly avenged!"

"No—he is innocent!" impulsively cried Sybil, straightening up and flashing a defiant glance around them. "He can and will explain everything for—"

"Be mighty sure he'll not lack the chance!" harshly muttered Felix Parry from out the gloom, which seemed darker than ever in those few minutes immediately preceding the rising of the moon.

"Father, he must not— You must promise to hold that foolish boy in check, or I'll forget my sex and keep guard myself," Sybil forced her lips to utter with almost painful calmness.

Arnold Parry caught her hand, drawing it through his arm and leading her into the house, lighted up now by the servants who had been left in charge, and who had caught the sounds of their unexpectedly early return.

The rancher paused when fairly inside the room, his blue eyes fixed with a gravely troubled gaze upon the face of his child, shocked by the great change which his love could trace therein.

"I'll do the best I know how, child, but Robert Runnoyer must clear his skirts of all wrong in this unlucky affair before he can again set foot across my threshold. Even you ought to be able to see that!"

"He can—he will!" passionately cried Sybil, taking fire at even a hint that Riata Rob could fail to prove himself true and honest. "Robert is pure as refined gold—how could I love him so, else?"

"Once I thought—I'll try to think so still, little girl, for your dear sake," said Arnold Parry, his tones far from steady as he looked through a mist at the pale, hysterical face of his daughter.

"And Felix—hold him in check if you love me, father! It would be a double murder—it would kill me, too, to have harm come to my lover, my king, my very soul!—through any of my kindred."

Plainly fearing to trust herself farther, Sybil broke away from Arnold Parry's grasp, fleeing to her own chamber, there to seek such consolation as she might be able to find in solitude.

It was some little time before the two younger men entered the house. Owen Taylor, like a true horseman, insisted on caring for his big black with his own hands, and Felix Parry stuck doggedly to his heels.

"That's all right enough," he said, with a grim nod. "I know you are coming in. I'm just waiting to keep you company."

"And to see that I don't forget the way thither, eh?" laughed the man from El Paso, seemingly amused by the fancy.

"Take your time. I'm in no mighty rush."

Owen Taylor looked at the pale face of the young rancher for a few moments by the lantern-light, then resumed his care of the big black, whistling softly to himself the while.

Among other changes brought about by the day and evening just past, by no means the least was in Felix Parry himself. From a hot-headed and uncertain-tempered youth, he seemed transformed into a cold, stern and dangerous man.

Owen Taylor finished his work without paying further attention to his young friend, then as quietly joined arms with Felix and bore him company into the house, where they found Arnold Parry awaiting their coming near a well-supplied table.

"We were cheated out of our supper at the pavilion; maybe we can get along with this until breakfast," he said, nodding for the two younger men to take seats.

"Business first—who can think of gorging now, with that cursed scoundrel going unwhipped of justice?" harshly cried Felix, his blue eyes almost flashing fire as they paused on the grave, calm face of Owen Taylor. "You say you've got a hold of some sort on the knave; what is it, Taylor?"

Arnold Parry turned upon his guest with sudden fierceness in face and manner, for up to this moment he had been kept wholly in the dark as to the suspicions entertained by his son against the honor of Riata Rob, though he knew that his son had taken a sudden and powerful dislike to the young rancher.

"You knew of this beforehand, Mr. Taylor?" he demanded, a flush of angry suspicion tinging his face. "Did you bring that woman here?"

"I did not bring her here, dear sir," was the prompt reply, frankly meeting that hot gaze like honesty itself. "I won't say I never heard of her before, for that would hardly be true; but I will say that, had I thought of her at all this night, it would be as one many a long league from this range."

"You say you have heard of her before: then, is there any truth to the claim she made this evening?"

"Is she really married to Riata Rob?" supplemented Felix.

"Now you've got me!" frowned Taylor. "The woman talked as though she meant every word she uttered, but that don't make it gospel."

I knew that Runnoyer was mixed up with a girl, in some sort, down near El Paso, but I never thought it was so serious as this looks to be."

"Then—what is the hold you spoke of having over him?" impatiently demanded Felix.

"Sit down and we'll talk it all over," quietly said Taylor, setting the example he wished to have them follow. "There's plenty of time to spare, and it may call for not a little share of that before I can fairly explain my conduct since coming here."

Hardly knowing what to expect, but with an eager desire to get at the bottom facts as quickly as possible, father and son complied, sinking into seats and waiting for their guest to explain his meaning more clearly.

This Owen Taylor seemed in no particular hurry to do. He lit a cigar, with an apologetic bow, taking time to make sure it was burning perfectly before opening his lips to speak again.

"It was no lie I told when I said that I came here in hopes of finding a good ranch which I might buy," he began, gravely. "I really thought of settling down as a cattle-man, but only on condition that— Well, it's a difficult matter to explain, gentlemen, right to your faces, but—"

"What has all this got to do with Rob Runover?"

"More than you think, maybe," with a faint smile, then doggedly picking up the broken thread. "I meant to invest and settle down, provided I could win a wife to keep me company. Never mind names, just at present. I had no suspicion of how the case stood until I got here. I had never spoken to the lady. I had only seen her face on two different occasions, but that was enough to make me anxious to win her hand in marriage, if possible. So—I came up here."

"Now about Robert Runnoyer," his words coming freer. "I knew him down El Paso way, and over the line in Mexico, though then he passed as a native-born Mexican, and called himself Ruperto Ramon."

"He was a wild, reckless fellow then, and ugly rumors were plentiful enough, some connecting him with smuggling, others with train-wrecking and highway robbery; how well-founded I'll not undertake to say."

"But where there's so much smoke, you'll always find some fire, and I felt that the fellow was wholly unworthy an alliance with a lady as pure and innocent as Miss Parry. Yet I had no actual proofs against him, and without such, I knew I was almost helpless."

"Why didn't you come to us frankly and—"

"Would you have believed my unsupported word?"

Arnold Parry drooped his head, with a stifled groan.

"That is so—we were all under a spell!"

"All the range looked up to Riata Rob as little less than a god! With the festival coming on, and he their pet champion, one word from his lips would have set a howling mob after me, lynch-roped in hand! You know that, to the full as surely as I know it myself. So—I had only one chance against him in the short time at my disposal: to prove that their pet champion hardly deserved their worship, and by covering him with ridicule, if not actual shame, drive him from the field long enough for me to gather positive proofs of his utter worthlessness. I thought I could do this; I tried the best I knew how; you saw how completely I failed. And in failing, I learned that Riata Rob was ten times the man I gave him credit for!"

"You call him a man? After that poor woman—"

"He called her crazy; may he not have been right in so doing?"

"You dare defend the scoundrel?"

"I dare try to treat him justly, even though I may dislike him as bitterly as even you can," was the quiet reply. "I'll agree to help you expose him, if there is really anything criminal in his past life, but I'm done with dealing blows from under cover."

"You say yourself that he was known as a criminal down along the border; isn't that enough?" fumed Felix, hotly.

"When we can prove all those rumors true—yes."

"All right; I'm not going to let the grass grow under my feet before bringing the doubly-perjured scoundrel to book!" sternly cried the young rancher, pushing back his chair as he sprung to his feet and took a quick look at the weapons at his belt.

"Stop, son!" cried Arnold Parry, also rising. "Where are you going? What desperate act have you in mind now?"

"Nothing worse than calling on a lady, father," with a short laugh as he frankly met those anxious eyes.

"Then—you're not going to look up Rob Runnoyer?"

"I'm going to the Gridiron to see that woman, if she's still alive. I must know the whole truth, and I can find out from her just how guilty that fellow is. Then—when I know everything—will be time enough to call on Riata Rob for a final settlement!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

RIATA ROB GROWS RECKLESS.

IN swiftly growing amazement Jason Runnover stared into the flushed face of his son, dumfounded for the moment by that blunt admission.

"What! you married the wench?" he ejaculated, sharply.

"Pepita said so. Maybe I did. I told you I was drunk."

"Married her! Yet you dared to court and win the promise of another woman to marry you? Bah!" with a short, bitter laugh as he flung out a bony hand toward the decanter and empty glasses. "I'm a fool, and you're too drunk this blessed minute to realize what you're saying!"

"I wish you were right—about myself, of course, father," with a reckless laugh as he poured a fresh supply of whisky into his glass. "What makes drunk come so easily when it isn't wanted—so hard when its coming might prove a relief to— Bah! I'm the fool, now!"

He was lifting the glass to his lips, when Jason Runnover struck it out of his hand with a force that sent it to splinters against the wall. And grasping the decanter by its neck, the old rancher flung it through the open window.

"Not another drop passes your lips this night, Rob Run-over! Not another drop until you've made a clean breast of all this to your father!"

"Devil a care I'm caring," laughed Riata Rob, leaning back in his chair and recklessly encountering that blazing gaze. "The cursed stuff only sets my blood on fire without fazing my brain—and that's the sick spot about me this blessed night!"

"I believe it! I believe you are actually going crazy!"

"Then that's right where you fool yourself, daddy mine," nodded the Range Champion, his tone and manner abruptly changing. "I'm just as sane as you dare be, though sometimes I'd give—a fig for might-have-been!" snapping his fingers sharply, the reckless glitter coming back to his big gray eyes: eyes that matched his jetty hair and swarthy skin so oddly. "What is to be will be, and if the skies are to fall in the morning, so much the more need of acting our parts well this night!"

"I wish I could think you were only acting, Robert," gravely said the ranchero, his voice trembling strangely for one of his grim, hard nature. "I don't know my boy in what I see before me now!"

"You'll find him again when the sun comes up, father. Until then—let me play a little loose, or maybe you'll have that crazy rascal on your hands, after all!"

"All right; to-morrow goes. I'll see you safely in bed, then—"

"No, you'll not, daddy. I warned you that the devil had cut loose, and he'll never crawl under cover again without having his frolic out. He brought Pepita here—poor little girl!"

That hard, reckless tone suddenly grew soft and uncertain, and as he uttered those three words, Riata Rob drooped his head, shivering as though an icy draught had suddenly struck across his person.

Jason Runnover said nothing; he was completely taken beyond his depths. If he had felt sure of any one thing in this world, it had been of his son's honor and perfect rectitude. Now—what was he to think after what had transpired that night, added to these reckless admissions made by the lips of that same son?

"I acted the dog, didn't I, father?" abruptly spoke Riata Rob, and Jason Runnover roused with a start, to see his son watching him keenly. "Well, the Old Boy tempted me, and I fell! Is that so mighty strange? Did you always rise superior to temptation, father?"

"What—I don't understand you, sir!" stammered the old grazier, his face blanching to an almost ghastly pallor.

"Then we're on an equal footing, for blessed if I can exactly understand my own self," laughed Riata Rob, throwing his partly-consumed cigar over his shoulder and out at the open window. "But I do know this much: I'd give ten years of my life if that little woman was back across the border, safe and sound and one-half as happy as she was when black luck brought me across her pathway!"

"Then—you were not jesting? You really met and— Curse it all, boy!" with an outburst of irritation that made his voice sound true to nature once more. "Since you've said so much, you've got to say more! You've got to clear this ugly matter up or—"

"Come into the woodshed, boy!" mocked the reckless young man, then with another of those sudden changes which seemed so foreign to his nature, as known to the father: "I'd have asked you to listen, father, if you hadn't ordered me to confess. I believe it would drive me clean crazy were I to keep on the old mask this night!"

"I'll listen to what you have to say, Robert," was the grave remark. "Speak freely, but mind you: the whole truth without reserve. It mustn't be said after this night that Jason Runnover is still a perfect stranger to his own son!"

"Or the son to his father—all right," with a low, hard laugh that caused a shiver to creep

over the old man's frame. "I'll make full and free confession, even at the risk of shocking your delicate sense of honor. And as a beginning: you remember my trip to El Paso and the border, some three years ago? The last time don't count."

Jason Runnover nodded his head. Just then he hardly dared trust himself to speak aloud.

"Well, I run across Pepita down there, living a few miles across the line. Never mind just how we met, or just how I picked up a speaking acquaintance with the little darling; enough that before a week had gone by, we both of us lost our heads, almost as utterly as we had lost our hearts before them."

"Pepita lived with an old hag of a woman: her mother, I believe, though I took care to see as little of her as might be. And she was willing enough to keep her distance as long as I had dollars to toss that way. Bah! it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, even at this distance!"

"A couple of rascally tricksters, who only wanted to fleece you!"

Riata Rob made a fierce gesture of dissent.

"You can say so, being my father, but if any other lips had tried to blacken my Pepita, I'd nail the lie to them with my fist!"

"Yet you flouted her boldly enough at the pavilion!"

"For which I deserve to scorch in Tophet for a million years! And—did you notice the kid? Did it—look anything like me?"

"I never thought to look. I took it all for a put-up job to down you, by Parry and Taylor. Do you mean to say that it is your son?"

"If it is Pepita's—yes!" gloomily nodded Riata Rob.

Jason Runnover caught his breath sharply. Until this moment he would not permit himself to believe, but this cleared away all hopes.

"Why did you deny her, then? Why not have acted the honest man I always thought you? I would have welcomed them both, for your sake, Robert! Ay! and been prouder of them than of that other girl!"

"Well—I never set eyes on the kid before. And then—there was a fellow: Gunter Klam he called himself, who kept skulking about the place, as I was sent warning. Then her old hag of a mother was a holy terror! So—I just dropped it all, way back, thinking maybe I was well out of the scrape, after all!"

"Her mother led me on, you see, and all the time I knew that she hated me like—ay! worse than sin, a heap sight! And so—as I'd taken the name of Ruperto Ramon for the trip, you understand—I had no fears of anything ever drifting clear up this way to trouble me. But through it all I couldn't quite choke out the old passion! Through it all I loved Pepita as I never loved another woman!"

"Then you never really loved that Parry girl?" quickly asked Jason Runnover, seeming to extract a bit of pleasure from that fact.

Riata Rob hesitated before replying, and when he did speak it was with slow, uncertain words:

"Yes, I believe I did. I know I did. Yet—I was under an spell of some sort. At the start I made love to Sybil partly to spite you, but more because it promised to turn out a good speculation. Then I found myself getting beyond my depth, and loving Sybil for herself. And all the time I knew—like one in a dream, if you can understand that, father—all the time I knew that I loved Pepita a thousand-fold more dearly than I did or ever could love Sybil!"

"The devil's own spell, sure!" groaned Runnover, utterly amazed.

"It's gospel, all the same," with a grim nod. "I never knew how dearly I did love the little woman, until I saw her bleeding at my feet! Gods! the sight will drive me mad even yet!" he harshly panted, springing to his feet and turning toward the closed door.

"And this mother—what did she look like in the face?"

"Like grim death on a monument! All but her eyes; they were like mine, and yours, father. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing—I only fancied"—breaking off with a shiver as he looked toward the window at which he had seen that ghostly face.

"Well, I'm off for a bit. Where? To pay my wife and child a bit of a visit, of course!" laughed Riata Rob, as he left the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE WIDOW AND HER KLAM.

THERE had been no question raised as to where Pepita Ramon and her child should be taken, or what was to be done for them. After a fashion peculiarly her own, Widow Kate Malin had settled that, taking full possession of the unfortunate child-mother, and with Dr. Beeman added to her escort, saw that this new patient was conducted to the Gridiron Ranch with as much speed as was consistent with safety.

And until the gentle swaying of the litter roused Pepita to consciousness enough to cry out for her child, Widow Kate carried that little specimen of humanity snugly clasped to her own warm breast.

"Sure, honey, dear, it's robbing ye I'd like to be, if ownly for the eyes of it!" she muttered,

but placing the child in its mother's arms, after a quick glance toward the physician.

Not for long. The swaying sent Pepita off into a half-doze, and though she murmured a bit against it, Widow Kate soon regained possession of the little lad, nor resigning him again until after their present journey was completed.

Once at the Gridiron, Widow Kate lent Dr. Beeman such assistance as he required to dress the wound, drawing a long breath of relief as he decided that, though painful and likely to require quiet for a considerable period, the wound was not dangerous to life itself.

"Sure, thin, it's glad I am on manny an account!" bore her sigh of relief company. "Riata Rob has played the devil an' all, but it isn't bloody murder I'd want to see painted on the face o' him, and—"

"I should judge this incision to have been self-inflicted, even if I had not been informed that the woman tried to commit suicide by turning the knife against her own breast. If a man—if Robert Runnover, for instance, had dealt the blow, why—"

"Av he didn't, thin man was born an angel and has kept on bein' that same elegant creature ever since!" indignantly interjected Widow Kate, as poor Pepita shivered and moaned something, only the name of Ruperto being articulate.

Having properly cared for her wound, Dr. Beeman compounded a draught which speedily sent Pepita Ramon off into a restful sleep, and after seeing that little Ruperto was fairly stuffed to repletion, Widow Kate quickly crooned him to sleep, leaving him cuddled down in the center of her own bed, a kiss fresh upon his lips, and a single tear glistening on his softly-flushed cheek.

"The pity of it all!" she murmured, smiling a bit at her own tender-heartedness as she noted that little drop. "Rob, Rob, ye beguillin' villain!"

Through all this bustle and confusion Gunter Klam had listened and marveled, longing to learn what it was all about, though in a manner fearing to push himself forward after that significant lesson read him by his eccentric hostess.

A solution came, however, and Widow Kate brought it, sitting down before the wounded detective and curtly telling him of the tragic scene at the pavilion, though without mentioning names, all the time watching his strongly-marked face in expectation of surprising a secret before he could effectually cover it over.

"You don't—tell me it wasn't Pepita Ramon, Mrs. Malin?"

His face had turned much paler, and there was a curious catch in his voice as he eagerly gazed into Widow Malin's face.

"Would it surprise you so dreadfully, then, Mr. Klam?" she gravely asked, trying harder than ever to read what might lie below the surface.

"It would hurt me far more! Poor little woman!"

"Then you brought her here with you?" sharply demanded the widow, her black eyes beginning to sparkle dangerously. "You thought nothing of the pain she must endure, only of wreaking your spite on the head of Robert Runnover? Is that it?"

Gunter Klam was staring into her face with little eyes assuming quite a respectable size, thanks to his astonishment.

"Why, you can't possibly think—"

"Yes or no; did you bring Pepita Ramon here to denounce Robert Runnover as her husband?"

"No, I did not!" snapped the detective, sharply. "I had not the ghost of an idea that she was in this region. If I had—well, maybe I'd have sent my first summons to that dirty villain through my gun!"

In a certain sense Mrs. Malin was satisfied. Gunter Klam clearly knew all about Pepita Ramon and the man who had figured as her husband near the Mexican line. He should tell her everything that bore on that point, even though Robert Runnover be proven an utterly heartless villain.

"I'll tell you all I know, dear madam," said Gunter Klam, reading that determination in her comely face. "But first—Pepita? She is not so badly hurt? She will not—not die?"

The words came out in a gulp, and Widow Kate gave her first patient credit for more of humanity than she had ever thought could attach itself to one of his detested and detestable profession.

"What would I be doing, then, to let the poor darlint die av—niver a bit, man, dear! Sure and we'll have her up and about, bright as any rosy-posy before the month is wasted. But—it's other talking I want ye to be doing most, Mr. Klam. And as a nate little beginning, maybe you'd tell me just what the little woman is to yoursilf, now?"

"Were you to ask her, I fear she'd say I was her bitterest enemy," frowned Gunter Klam, gnawing at his thumb.

"Which would mean—what?"

"That I'd tried to befriend her when she was deserted by that dirty scoundrel."

"Ye might have known better, man!" laughed Widow Kate, but with a touch of pathos underlying her tones. "Sure, man, dear, a woman niver loves so madly as whin she's abused or b'aten by the wan man all the world holds for her!"

"I begin to believe it, but I didn't, then," grimly nodded Gunter Klam. "I made my mistake at the start, and I don't reckon she will ever forget—much less forgive."

"With a man and a woman; that's an easy riddle," nodded Mrs. Malin, settling herself down as though bent on a comfortable dish of gossip. "It ought to be well worth the telling, Mr. Klam."

"Which is equivalent to a command," bowed the detective, with a half-laugh that pointed his meaning.

Though he had seen comparatively little of Mrs. Malin since his arrival at the Gridiron, that little was enough to warn him that he must follow the path her finger pointed out, or pay the penalty. She had probably saved him from a night of suffering, to say the least, but in return for so doing she had made him her bound slave, so long as she saw fit to hold that charge of attempted horse-stealing over his head.

His wounds were doing well, and now that their full extent was known, and the sickening shock had passed away, he was able to walk with comparative ease. Yet he dared not leave the room assigned him, lest he run his head into the loop of a lasso!

"Call it request, Mr. Klam," bowed Mrs. Malin, smiling bewitchingly as she knew so well how to do. "And to begin—there was an actual marriage?"

"If a priest can make such a ceremony legal, then Pepita Ramon is indeed a lawfully wedded wife," slowly replied the detective.

"If a priest can't, then who can?" almost indignantly cried Widow Kate, flushing up quickly. "Do you mean to say that you know, of your own knowledge, that Robert Runnuyer married Pepita Ramon?"

"I know that he married her, though it was under another name; Ramon, he called himself at the time, and I never heard his right to that title brought into question until after he got mixed up in some ugly scrapes along the line; for he cut a dash on each side of the border, if all accounts be true."

"You can swear that Ramon was Runnuyer?"

"I can, if the man known up here as Riata Rob is Runnuyer," firmly asserted the detective.

"You were acquainted with the girl before she married?"

"Yes," his eyes drooping and his voice softening a bit. "I knew her well enough to ask her to marry me, but her mother wouldn't listen to that; she drove me away at the point of a knife. And when I managed to see Pepita alone, she told me it was worse than vain to hope for any nearer tie than that of pure friendship. Like a fool, I took it to heart and went away. When I came back— Well, it was too late for me!"

"She was married, then?"

"Not yet. But she had come under the spell of those big gray eyes and that satanically handsome face."

"You tried to stop the marriage?"

"What right had I to do that? I knew nothing positive against the rascal then. I only knew him as a dashing, reckless sort of sport. I may have believed him an evil scoundrel, but what woman in love would take warning from such as that?"

"Never a one—it's right you are, Mr. Klam," nodded Widow Kate, gravely. "I never knew a woman that wouldn't choose a dashing rascal before a suave saint! And I'm a woman myself, ye understand!"

Just the ghost of a laugh came into those little eyes, but Gunter Klam quickly quenched it. He was hardly in a position to risk the enmity of Mrs. Malin by letting her see that he even suspected her secret regarding Riata Rob.

There was a brief silence between them, neither seeming to take note of the growing lateness. Gunter Klam was the one to break that silence, speaking slowly, like one who wished to feel the ground before he trusts himself upon it:

"After what has happened this night, Mrs. Malin, can you still hold my hands bound? After the manner in which that villain treated poor Pepita Ramon—his lawfully wedded wife, remember!—can you still ask me to let him run at large?"

"What would ye do if I said no, Mr. Klam?" slowly asked Mrs. Malin.

"Arrest Robert Runnuyer as a murderer—no less!"

"It's hard to think that of blithe Bobbie!" exclaimed the widow, with a deep breath that was almost a sigh. "There is no mistake? You are not letting your hatred—for if ye love the woman who claims to be his lawful wife, ye can't help but hate the lad!—run away with your sober judgment, man, dear?"

"I know that Ruperto Ramon, alias Robert Runnuyer, quarreled with a man over the card-table, stabbing him to death. I know that it was proven at the inquest that the murdered man was totally without weapons at the time;

that Ramon picked the quarrel, stabbing him to the heart without giving the poor devil even the ghost of a chance for his life. The assassin fled, and though a heavy reward was offered for his arrest and conviction by the friends of the dead man, nothing was known of his whereabouts until a short time ago. Then a fortunate chance put me on his track, and—you know the rest, madam."

"And all this was done by Rob Runnuyer?"

"All this, and much more. I've only spoken of the one crime which can be positively proven against him, passing by a score of others hardly less atrocious. Now—will you still stand in the way of the law?"

"It would be her death—the poor child-woman!" murmured Widow Kate, springing to her feet and pacing the floor agitatedly. "Sure, man, if ye'd ownly seen her face as I saw it! If ye—"

"If she dies, he is her murderer as surely as though his own hand had plunged that knife into her heart!" flashed Gunter Klam, hotly.

Mrs. Malin seemed on the point of making some reply, when the silence of the night without was abruptly shattered by the rapid explosion of firearms at no great distance from the front of the Gridiron.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW RIATA ROB LOST HIS BADGE.

OTHER ears besides those of Mrs. Malin and the detective were startled by that alarm, for the Gridiron cowboys had ample food for discussion, and having put up their cattle, they were gathered together in little knots, eagerly or gloomily talking over the unfortunate ending of the long-anticipated festival.

"Steady, lads!" cried John Morgan, springing to the front and exerting his authority as foreman. "There's a heap sight more than whisky fireworks out yonder, and— Hark!"

A faint, wailing cry came floating to their ears across the moonlighted plain, sending a half-superstitious shiver creeping over more than one sturdy frame, and causing nearly every hand to seek for a weapon of some description.

"What is it all?" cried Widow Kate Malin, crossing the threshold in a flying leap that spoke well for her muscles. "Johnny Morgan!"

"Ripe an' ready, boss!" was the quick response, as the foreman came hastily forward.

"Who's burning powder? None of the boys?"

"Not a hooter, ma'm, boss. We was just—"

"Get lights, and I'll go with ye! Hasten, man! Did ye hear that cry?—sure it sounded like the banshee av owld Oireland!"

Though the half-moon was shining from an almost cloudless sky, casting its silvery light over the far-stretching plain, John Morgan never thought of disputing the orders of his mistress. Men rushed for lanterns, and then, armed and ready for any emergency, the cowboys moved forward in the direction from whence that double alarm had come.

Widow Kate bore them company, and if Johnny Morgan had not been lighter of foot than the majority of cowboys—who are almost as hampered on foot as the veriest horse-Indian, thanks to their constant life in the saddle and their painfully high-heeled boots—the mistress of the Gridiron would fairly have outstripped even her foreman.

As it was, they simultaneously discovered a human form lying on the plain, still and motionless as though dead!

Seemingly through accident, John Morgan crossed the path of his mistress, forcing her to slacken her pace abruptly, thus permitting him to dash ahead and gain the first fair look at the face of the prostrate figure.

"It isn't—it's young Parry!" he cried, in a tone that was composed of almost as much relief as amazement.

For his first thought had been of Riata Rob, and knowing how great a favorite the Range Champion had been with Mrs. Malin, he hoped in some manner to spare her the worst of the shock, should his sudden fears prove correct.

"The poor, mad lad!" panted Mrs. Malin, reaching the spot and gazing down upon that figure; for the face was lying turned to the ground, and but a glimpse of one cheek could be caught by the lantern-light.

Only the one swift glance, then all eyes were swept around in quest of his slayer; but in vain.

As far as the eye could reach by the uncertain light of the stars and moon, no other figure could be seen, afoot or on horseback.

"Sure, he wouldn't be shooting himself?" asked Widow Kate, shivering at the thought, yet with an echo in her voice that betrayed her half-hope.

Rapidly as they had acted, there had been delay enough to permit one of swift foot to escape without being discovered, if nothing had turned up to hinder his instant flight. Yet, though feeling this, Kate Malin tried to deny the possibility in her own mind. For—

Now that his mind was partly set at ease, John Morgan fell to work with the coolness of

one fully equal to the emergency. He knelt down by the side of the prostrate figure, gently turning it over on its back, one hand seeking the region of the heart, as the quickest method in his list of learning whether or no aught of life lingered there.

His hand instinctively came away as it met a mass of blood, his fingers recognizing a slit in the garments which could have been done only by a knife.

"He didn't shoot to hurt his own self, boss! They's a hole here that ye could drive a mule through!"

"But he done some shootin', all the same!" supplemented Jack Caper, who had caught up a revolver from the ground a few paces from where the body lay. "Hyar's his gun, an' they's four empty shells in it!"

"Look in the left fist o' him, will ye?" fairly gasped another of the cowboys, making a forward spring and lifting the hand indicated so that all could see; then dropping it to the earth, recoiling like one who had received a heavy blow.

For there, glittering in the rays of the lantern standing only a couple of feet distant, was the medal for which Riata Rob had that day worked such wonders!

"Hide it—don't let anybody—"

The broken sentence came gaspingly from the pale lips of Widow Kate Malin, without her own volition as something of the awful truth burst upon her brain. She clapped a hand over her mouth and so cut short those damning words, but even as she did so she knew that every man present had heard and understood her wild meaning.

"It's all fer you to say, ma'am," John Morgan said, slowly rising to his feet, drawing a revolver as he glanced quickly over the faces of all near by. "They's only one law fer me, an' that's your will. Ef you say hide an' fergit, hide an' fergit goes. Ef I hev to kill my warmest pard to make him take the oath never to let on to the world!"

He meant every word he uttered. At a sign from her, he would compel his mates to bind themselves by a solemn oath to keep that ugly discovery secret, nor would he hesitate to shoot dead the man who dared to refuse that oath.

Such men lived, do still live, though they are few and far between.

His cold, deadly earnestness caused a revulsion in the woman, and Mrs. Malin quickly rallied, speaking rapidly:

"No; the law must take its course, though I ask it as a favor that none of you will make mention of this terrible discovery until I give you permission to speak. Am I asking too much of you, my men?"

"I'll answer fer the lot—no, you ain't, ma'am," gravely said Morgan. "Mebbe it ain't so bad as—"

A faint groan from Felix Parry cut him short, and nearly every one present took that sign of remaining life as a good omen.

Mrs. Malin secured the tell-tale bit of jewelry, then had six cowboys clasp hands by gently slipping them beneath the body as it lay upon its back. At her command they lifted Felix Parry, bringing another and louder groan from his lips with the movement. And then, sending a man on in advance to rouse up Dr. Beeman to attend another patient, she led the grim march back to the Gridiron.

Dr. Beeman was ready when the young man was carried into the ranch, and his brief nap had not sobered him sufficiently to impair his skill or steadiness of hand.

Mrs. Malin sent the cowboys outside, bidding them remember their pledge of secrecy, then lent her aid to second the doctor.

It was found that Felix Parry had not been shot, but stabbed close over the heart, making a wound even more dangerous than it was ugly to the sight. So serious did the case appear that Dr. Beeman refused to venture an opinion as to the outcome. Time and care alone could tell.

Before the injury was fully dressed, Felix Parry recovered his senses sufficiently to recognize the faces bending over him, and though he was repeatedly warned that his very life might depend on his perfect silence for some hours, he persisted in saying enough to point out his assailant.

He had met him afoot, not far from the spot where he had fallen, and by the dim moonlight had mistaken him for one of the cowboys belonging to the Gridiron, so addressing him. The fellow recoiled, at first, but even then Felix Parry did not suspect the truth, and again called to him, asking if Pepita Ramon was in the ranch, and if she was still living.

"He came running forward," added Parry, though his weakness caused many a gasping break in his sentences which it is not necessary to reproduce in these lines. "He called me by name, asking what business I had to be skulking about the place where his—where Pepita was. And then I recognized him—Robert Runnuyer!"

"I never offered to harm him. He jumped forward and cut me. I fell, shooting after him as he fled; but I felt sick, and couldn't take any aim. I never gave him cause—I only hit him once, after he cut me. I hit him on the breast, where I saw his medal shine. Then—"

"Send for—father! Tell him—Riata Rob mur—"

His head fell back with a choking gasp, and Widow Kate cried out:

"Mother, Mary—the poor lad's dead!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DEAD PAST REVIVIFIED.

"WAKEN! Rouse up, Jason Runnoyer!"

The ranchman gave a shivering start. A husky sound that was between a sigh and a moan came through his lips, but that was all.

"Jason Runnoyer, rouse thee!" repeated that sibilant voice, and a bony hand seemed burying its fingers into the flesh of his shoulder. "Rouse thee, Jason Runnoyer, for the devil is waiting!"

"What the— Who calls?"

His lids lifted heavily, like those of one fighting against a drugged stupor. His eyes stared dully before him, and he even made an attempt to leave his chair, to stand erect, though some invisible power prevented any such movement.

There came the bright flashing of polished steel in front of his eyes. A cold blade touched his lips, then slipped down until its keen point fairly pricked through the skin exposed by his opened collar.

"What the foul fiend!" he began, his growing rage seeming to aid in casting off that curiously numbing spell which had so unexpectedly overtaken him; but then the fierce words were frozen on his lips as a face came between his eyes and the wall beyond: the face of—

"Dolores!"

Hoarsely, barely audible even to his own ears came that name, and the grim old ranchman fell to shivering in every fiber, just as he had once before, when that same face appeared to him at the window.

The keen point pricked his throat more sharply. A hand dropped over his shivering lips. A voice, subdued but full of fiercest menace and most undying hatred, hissing uttered the warning:

"Silence, dog! 'Tis for me to speak and you to listen, save when I bid you break the silence. Now—one whisper from thy lips before I give thee leave, and all the help in Texas could avail thee little!"

Was it magic?

Those blazing eyes seemed to hold him fixed; that face remained almost touching his; yet it was no longer that of his lost wife, since a heavy curtain of some dark stuff covered it over from temples to chin.

He was a fool, for eyes tenfold sharper than his could never penetrate that mask with sufficient clearness to trace a likeness to any known face. And that one—she was dead, her face but a bony mask long since!

Jason Runnoyer rallied quickly, his usual cool nerve coming back to him for the moment. Like a flash his heavy winnings of that day recurred to him, and he fancied that this was but an effort to rob him.

The cold steel was still pricking his throat, but he cared little for that, since he knew he could twist his head aside swiftly enough to foil a thrust if—

"Try it, Jason Runnoyer, and the devil will foreclose his mortgage instant!"

"What— How did you do it?" gasped the ranchero, shivering anew as he felt his limbs securely hampered.

"As surely and as easily as death shall come to you at the first attempt to rouse up any of your sleepy cowboys, Jason Runnoyer!" mocked that voice, as a hand flung back the black covering and left bare a face—the same face which he had seen in that frightful dream of his the other evening!

"Dolores—you lie! She's dead—dead and buried!"

The woman—for woman it plainly was—drove the glittering knife into the table before Jason Runnoyer, leaving it quivering with handle upright while she slipped a smaller, more slender weapon from her bosom. She let the metal sheath fall with a musical tinkle on the polished wood, then held the blade close before those staring eyes.

"Silence, dog!" she coldly said, a fierce smile showing her still white and even teeth. "One whisper from your lips to give the alarm, and I pin them together with this blade, the slightest touch of which means death—death sure and inevitable, though life will linger in your brain until you have seen and felt your limbs rot and drop off, one after another!"

"Dolores—not dead?"

Only his lips moved. His limbs, his body, seemed held as though in a marble mold. The subtle drug which had been administered to him, how or by whom remained a mystery, now exerted its full powers, robbing him of strength and motion, almost of speech itself, even while permitting his brain to work as actively as ever.

"'Tis the old compound of which mother told you, Runnoyer, and at which you laughed and made light-hearted jest—for we were both light and merry of heart, then! Do you remember? Have you drowned all memory of those days, Jason? Even as you drowned your wife?"

Jason Runnoyer shrunk back as far as his

bonds would permit, shivering in every fiber, his face ghastly beyond description, great drops of cold sweat starting out over his forehead.

"I did not—you know I never harmed you, Dolores!" he gasped, though hardly any other ears could rightly have interpreted the husky, choking notes.

That white face drew back again, a low, bitter laugh bubbling from her lips as she toyed with the poisoned dagger.

"Not with your own hands, perhaps, Jason Runnoyer. You were too cowardly to go quite so far as that. Yet—you were none the less a murderer! You are none the less guilty! Ay! even though the dead has come to life and the river has lost its prey!"

Jason Runnoyer was desperately fighting against the dull, benumbing lethargy that held all save his brain and tongue helpless. His success was small, but doubtless it availed in a certain degree. If nothing else, it held that subtle poison in check, while with each passing moment his brain grew clearer and under better control.

Was he wrong? Had he passed so many weary years under a false impression? Was this indeed the face of the wife whose untimely fate he had mourned so bitterly—whose tragic death had come so near to fitting the lynchers' noose about his own throat—whose mad suicide had ended in his being driven to abandon all, to flee, a branded, ruined wretch, seeking another land where his face, his name, his tragic past were all alike unknown to his fellow-men?

"You lie!" he hoarsely panted, feeling the hot blood rushing to his brain and filling the veins until they stood out on his temples like writhing worms. "You're not my wife! Dolores—dead!"

"Dead once, but living now," laughed the woman, her fierce passions quelled or hidden under a mask of ice. "Dolores, but not the poor, weak, foolish Dolores you once knew—ah, no, Jason Runnoyer! That Dolores went down into the deep waters, driven to suicide by your cruelty, your shameful infidelity with—"

"You lie!" repeated the ranchero, once more vainly striving to break the curious spell that held his body helpless without the aid of those cunningly applied bonds. "As Heaven hears my oath, I never wronged my wife, even in thought!"

"With my own eyes I saw—my own ears heard your base treachery, Jason Runnoyer!" coldly asserted the woman. "Not once alone, but repeatedly. Time and again I saw, yet refused to believe my eyes. Over and over again I heard, yet stopped my ears and tried to reason that my senses were playing me falsely. For I loved you then—oh! how madly, how insanely I loved you, husband!"

Though low and subdued, there was intense passion in her voice, and as though carried away by the memories thus invoked, she bowed her head upon the table and shivered like a leaf.

Had he been mistaken, through all these years? Surely that was her face, changed though it had been by the passage of time, even as his own had altered, though the difference was so much less in her case. Had he caught but a passing glimpse of that face in a crowd of thousands, he would have noticed—ay! have recognized it!

"Dolores—my wife!" he hoarsely muttered, the words shaping themselves without the volition of his dizzy, confused brain.

"'Tis you who lie now, Jason Runnoyer!" flashed the woman, lifting her head and disclosing a face—still beautiful in features, but now almost demoniac in its fierce hatred and loathing. "I am not your wife, though I once was that pitiful creature! I am no longer Dolores. My name is Nemesis!"

"No—Dolores is dead—drowned!" muttered the ranchero, drawing a long breath, as his lids drooped, seeking relief from that brain-racking stare. "They found her—cold and lifeless! And I—I saw her placed under the sod!"

"And while so burying her, laughing in your sleeve even as you sprinkled crocodile tears upon the clods! And then, when the grave was hardly rounded over, turning away and flying to the arms of the woman who helped you ruin a life—helped you drive to madness and death the poor child whose only fault was that she loved a devil rather than a human creature!"

"You lie—I never—"

"You denied it then, when freshly exposed by that outraged child; it must come easier to your foul lips, after so many long years of practice," coldly interposed the woman, her eyes blazing with mingled hatred and triumph as they rested upon the man so hopelessly in her power. "She believed you to that bitter black day. She blamed her own eyes and ears for playing her false, simply because you assured her of your perfect innocence. But then—when she could no longer doubt—then the poor fool took her own life, rather than yours and that woman's who led your fancy astray!"

Jason Runnoyer shivered, groaning hollowly. Even his tongue seemed to fail him now, for he strove in vain to repeat his declaration of guiltlessness.

"Dolores died. She flung herself into the river, and so sought oblivion from all that had rendered her life a living hell!"

"I found her—I buried her!" faintly moaned Runnoyer.

"A body was found and buried, but it was not hers!" flashed the woman, almost viciously. "Did you really believe that you were burying your dead wife, Jason Runnoyer, or was it but an excuse for flinging off all bonds and giving yourself wholly unto that evil woman?"

"I swear—who are you?" hoarsely panted the rancher, rallying his powers by a desperate effort, leaning as far forward as his bonds would permit, staring into that face as though he would learn the whole truth, let the consequences be what they might.

"I was Dolores Runnoyer; I am her living ghost, come back from the grave to haunt you to madness or to a shameful death! I am the one who once fairly worshiped you as a god, Jason Runnoyer! And now I am the one who has sworn by all heaven and hell to never give over until bitter black disgrace covers all of that name—until father and son are held up as a byword and a curse! I am—listen, Jason Runnoyer!"

"I was your wife. Your foul treachery drove me to seek rest in death. I threw myself into the river, and lost all consciousness. But I was not to perish thus. I was rescued—by a true-hearted, whole-souled man, who swore to keep my secret sacred until I should give him leave to speak and publish the truth to the whole world.

"He nursed me back to life, and though there came many weary years of madness over me, he never faltered, never failed, ever true to his trust. And in the end he won me back to life and reason. And when I brooded over my bitter wrongs, he whispered thoughts of vengeance. He lived long enough to point out the path to that revenge; to show me how surely I could strike to your heart—through your son. How? By leading Riata Rob on to marrying his own sister!"

CHAPTER XXX.

NOT SO MUCH WOMAN AS DEMONESS.

JASON RUNNOYER had listened to those swiftly-uttered sentences like a man in a dream, but as the woman fairly hissed forth those last words, he overcame that subtle drug sufficiently to cry out:

"His sister? You lie, hag! He has no sister!"

A low, intensely bitter laugh cut him short, and there was something in those viciously glittering eyes that made him shiver again.

"So much for the boasted instinct attributed to parents! No sister? No daughter? Yet within but a few short hours you have met and listened to the voice of that daughter—your second child!"

"It isn't—it can't be truth you're speaking, Dolores!" gasped the terribly-tortured man.

"So—you recognize me at last?" laughed the woman, settling herself more comfortably in her seat, like one who feels that much remains to be said and done before a parting. "I am no longer a ghost? At length you realize that it was not my corpse, but the body of another poor unfortunate over whose grave you shed such bitter tears?"

"As Heaven hears me, Dolores—"

"I'll make sure that none earthly hears you!"

As though fearful lest his voice should awaken the curiosity of some of the inmates or out-door servants, the woman quickly flung a thick bandage over his head, drawing it tightly across his lips, knotting it securely behind his neck, then drawing back to nod approval at the thoroughness of this precaution.

"Your ears are open, Jason Runnoyer, and that will be all that is necessary."

"Shall I begin at the beginning?" she added, drawing her chair back to the table, leaning both arms on the support, her right hand toying with the poisoned dagger, her large eyes—of the same peculiar gray that marked those of both father and son—fixed upon the face of the helpless ranchero. "Or have I said enough to make you comprehend how it was I escaped from that watery grave?"

"You are still trying to doubt—still loth to believe that I am indeed the Dolores who was once your wife—but in vain! You know I am what I claim to be. You recognize my face, my eyes, my voice!"

"So, let the earlier days go by without further mention, since you are convinced that I am still living, and that the grave you marked with a stone on which was carved a name, a date, a prayer, belongs to one unknown unto us both!"

"As I said, a noble man saved my life, though for many weary months I lay bereft of reason through illness. He nursed me back to life, and when I came to understand and appreciate and love him—for I did love my rescuer, though I had thought the heart died within my bosom forever when I could no longer doubt your vile treachery! When I came to love him, I repeat, I told him all my story."

"He offered to avenge me upon you, but I would not permit it. If vengeance should ever come, my hand must bring it about. But then—my little babe—yours and mine, Jason Runnoyer, born barely half a year after that black day of suicide! You try to doubt?" her tones

growing fiercer than before, though that had seemed impossible.

"You cannot, in the face of all my proofs! First, the date of my supposed death is engraved on that tombstone. Second, the birth of our child is recorded by a priest whose word will outweigh your oath. And from that day to this the record has been kept without a flaw, partly by me, then by the man who rescued me from the river, during the long years which I passed in madness.

"Why was I so careful, would you ask? Well, even then I had yearnings for vengeance, though at first it only went so far as to strip you and our oldest son—for I hated *him*, even as I hated *you*—of all your riches! Only so far, Jason Runnover. I was weak and silly, then! I know better, now!

"When I recovered my senses, our second child was growing rapidly up, promising to be even more lovely than you so often called her mother—in the days before that she-devil came between us with her false smiles and satanic arts!

"Through it all my faithful friend had kept track of your movements, and as soon as my brain was fit to receive that information, he told me all concerning you and our eldest child. Then—we began to plot and plan how the more surely we could punish you as your past crimes deserved.

"They were almost formed—our plans, I mean—when I lost my good friend. He died in my arms, his head pillowed on my bosom. Just as *you* used to lie and dream away the hours, Runnover!

"He died. I buried him, and with him all my hopes, my plans, my longing for vengeance seemed to die as well.

"After a time my senses began to waken once more, and having naught else to live for, I brooded over my vengeance. Our second child was growing up into a fine girl; how fine, your own eyes can bear witness, though poor Pepita has suffered, and with suffering changed somewhat for the worse.

"I was still brooding when he came our way—Riata Rob, as he is called here: Robert Runnover, your son and mine, as I knew from the first moment his dark, handsome face and those big gray eyes came under my notice.

"He fell in love with Pepita! His sister, bear in mind, Jason Runnover!" laughing fiercely as that face grew fairly purple, as those bandaged lips groaned hollowly in bitter agony.

"One word from my lips would have checked it all, but I closed my teeth upon them until the blood streamed down my chin! And keeping grim silence, I waited—watched and waited until the time was ripe for striking my first blow!"

"Devil!" came barely distinguishable from behind that bandage.

"Who made me so?" fiercely hissed the woman, her face fairly transfigured by intense hatred. "Who but *you*, Jason Runnover? Only for that I might have been—Bah!" leaning back in her chair and forcing a laugh. "It was so written, and no effort of mine could have changed the record.

"Yet I did all I could to help it along. I lured the spider into my little snare, and shoved the pretty fly into his jaws. What matter? If she was my child, so she was yours! And I hated all that held even a drop of that blood in their veins!

"They were legally married; I took care of that, for I felt you would suffer more under such a blow. They loved, they quarreled, and one day he fled far away in a mad fit of jealousy.

"He wronged her, for it was all my work. Pepita loved him too well to even look at another man. But his going made her ill—so ill that for many a long week I thought she would die!

"I learned that Riata Rob was courting a rich and beautiful maiden, and then I knew how to deal my second blow.

"I brought Pepita here, with his and her child. She denounced him, and—silly fool!—stabbed herself instead of him! She will die. Her blood rests on his head. And when he learns the whole horrible truth, he will—"

The woman broke off abruptly, pushing back her chair and springing to her feet, bending her head in listening for a single breath. The rapid clatter of horses' hoofs came through the open window, and without a word further she turned and fled from the chamber.

Jason Runnover strove vainly to break his bonds, to shake off that bandage, but before he could do either, the door was flung open to admit Riata Rob, pale, his eyes ablaze, his attire disordered and torn.

He uttered a cry of fierce wonder at seeing the helpless condition of his father, but quickly cut his bonds and set him at liberty.

"What is it? Who did this, father?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"The devil—" was all Jason Runnover could gasp, at first.

"The woods are full of 'em to-night, then!" laughed Riata Rob, his tones harsh and unnatural, his eyes filled with a strange glow as he added: "I met one of them myself, father, near the Gridiron!"

"Robert! what have you been doing?" cried Runnover, frightened despite his usually strong nerves by that wild expression.

"Playing the worm that's grown tired of being trodden under foot. The hot-headed fool tried it once too often and—Father! I reckon I've killed Felix Parry!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

UNDER THE WHITE FLAG.

THE early forenoon sun witnessed yet another gathering of horsemen on the range over which Riata Rob Runnover wielded the broad title of champion; but this time the gathering seemed bent on warlike rather than peaceful mission.

The difference lay not so much in the matter of arms, for wearing such was second nature to the bold Texans, but in the quiet, orderly, almost grim steadiness with which the men followed their chosen leaders. There was an absence of jest and laughter. And when one man saw fit to speak to another, he did so in tones just loud enough to be caught by the ears for which his words were intended.

After hearing the charge made by Felix Parry against Robert Runnover, and comparing it with what she had already gleaned from the investigation made of those shots and that cry, Mrs. Malin felt that her duty was plain: to send immediate word to Good Luck Ranch.

As swiftly as horseflesh could carry them, Arnold Parry and Owen Taylor came back with John Morgan. The father at once sought his son, whom he found still alive, lost in a half-sleep, half-stupor. Taylor won an interview with Widow Kate, learning from her lips a true and accurate account of the discovery made, not alone of Felix, but of the championship emblem won the day before by Riata Rob.

"If he is guilty of this crime, I'll never try to shield him from the punishment he so richly deserves," said Mrs. Malin, with just a touch of unsteadiness in her tones and a suspicious moisture about her fine dark eyes. "But—first prove him guilty! Harm a hair of his head before that, and, woman as I am, I'll revenge him on the whole lot and parcel—so I will, now!"

With Arnold Parry's leave, Owen Taylor assumed charge of the matter, and while waiting to get a positive charge from Felix against his assailant, the man from El Paso sent out cowboys to summon the nearer ranchmen to the Gridiron.

When these were riding in hot haste to carry his messages, Owen Taylor, with John Morgan as partner, carefully and systematically examined the ground near the spot where Felix Parry had fallen.

The ground was dry and beaten, making it almost impossible to detect or follow up human footprints, but here and there they managed to find what seemed like heel-marks of one in rapid flight; and by following out the line thus indicated, they presently came upon a spot where a horse had been recently staked out at short tether.

The edges of the hole left by the iron picket-pin; the droppings of the animal; the hoof-prints themselves, were sufficiently plain to show the trailers that only a few hours at most could have elapsed since the animal was removed from the spot. And then—

"Sense the boss says it's the way to do, I kin take oath to them prents," soberly, almost gloomily uttered John Morgan, swallowing a disagreeable lump that persisted in rising up in his throat. "Red Prince owned them shoes, but I'm a liar ef I believe Riata Rob hed anythin' to do with tnis dirty job—yes, I jest am, now!"

"Then of course he can show a clean pair of hands," quietly said the man from El Paso, as he followed those tracks by the light of the lantern.

Straight on toward Run-over Ranch the trail led, and when followed far enough to satisfy both on this score, the trail was marked for future picking up, and the two men went back to the Gridiron.

Singly or in couples the neighboring ranchmen responded to that startling summons, and by the time the sun peeped above the earth-line to the east, a fairly formidable force was taking saddle in front of the Gridiron Ranch.

Prominent among them were Owen Taylor and Arnold Parry, the latter persisting in his rights, despite the heavy handicap of gray hairs and badly shattered nerves, added to a fall which he had received through his horse stumbling and rolling over him during that mad ride to what he believed was the death-bed of his only son.

This fall had partially disabled him, and helped lead to the conclusion which the leading members reached after consultation.

Felix Parry had revived sufficiently to repeat his charge of foul play against Riata Rob, but while so doing he had let drop a word or two that cast some faint doubts over the perfect truth of his story. It might be that Riata Rob could with honesty claim self-defense as his justification.

"If so, we can't hang him for murder, but

we can make him give satisfaction for the blood he has shed!"

Then, gravely, quietly, without a trace of bluster or animosity on his part, Owen Taylor laid claim to the right of representing Felix Parry, since the only male member of that family was partially disabled.

"Felix was my friend. It was through the knowledge I gave him regarding the secret life and evil deeds of Robert Runnover that he grew to distrust the man whom he had once called partner. Only for my warning he might never have come to blows with Riata Rob. So—if he is to be called to an account for this cutting, other than as a willful murderer, I claim the right to punish him as he deserves!"

Thus it came about that Owen Taylor led the little band of avengers as it moved toward Run-over Ranch on that bright forenoon.

Their progress was moderate until after the Run-over line was fairly crossed, for up to that point the trail of the Red Prince had been carefully picked out, to guard against possible mistakes. But after that the company rode briskly along until the buildings of Run-over Ranch came into full view.

Nearly every one in the company noticed the deserted appearance of the place. The building was closed. The barns and other out-buildings showed no signs of life. Not a cowboy was to be seen loitering about the place, and even the stock had disappeared.

Then—a puff of blue smoke shot out from the ranch, and a bullet came skipping along the dry ground, passing with an ugly screech not far to one side of one of the riders.

"That means halt!" grimly laughed Owen Taylor, reining in, his example being promptly followed by the remainder of the party. "All right. It also says that our game hasn't run clear out of the country!"

"It looks mightily like a confession of guilt, if not exactly a token of penitence!" said one of the ranchers.

"Wait a bit, and don't fully make up your minds until both sides have had an equal chance at explanation," quietly added Taylor, slipping out of the saddle and plunging his picket-pin home.

"He's a murderer—a cowardly assassin!" cried Arnold Parry, in tones that shook with mingled grief and anger. "I demand that you arrest him without further delay! I call on all white men to back me up in taking the midnight assassin who—"

Two of his neighbors with gentle force caught the half-crazed father, leading him further away from the spot where Owen Taylor was rapidly preparing for the next move.

Snapping off and stripping a rosin-weed of leaves and flower-tip, the man from El Paso tied a white silk kerchief to the rod thus formed, and with the flag of truce flying above his head in the gentle breeze, he advanced toward the ranch proper.

Not a sound came from the building after that warning shot. Not a head showed itself, until Owen Taylor had come within four-score yards of the front door. Then that barrier was abruptly flung open, and two thoroughly armed figures stepped out upon the porch.

"Steady—as you are!" sharply cried out one of these: Riata Rob in person, as the entire company could see at a glance.

They saw him throw up a rifle to cover the flag-bearer, but Owen Taylor saw even more. He saw a face that was almost deathlike in its unnatural pallor, with eyes that blazed as though on fire.

"Steady goes, Runnover, father and son!" coldly called out the man from down-country, halting, the flag resting lightly against his shoulder, the white silk forming a background against which his face was plainly outlined.

"Keep it there, then, El Paso! You're just my distance now!"

"If you must shoot, for the honor of Texas let me drop this flag first, Riata Rob. I'd hate to have it said that—"

"What business fetches you here, after this fashion, sir?" harshly interposed Jason Runnover, one bony hand turning aside the muzzle of the rifle held by his hot-blooded son. "What have we done that you bring an army at your back, each hand holding a gun?"

"First, to hear Riata Rob explain when, where and how he lost the championship medal which he so gallantly won no later than yesterday?"

"What right have you to put such questions to me?" sharply cried the young rancher, relinquishing the rifle which Jason Runnover still grasped. "Out with it—in one word, Owen Taylor!"

"You are accused of murderously assaulting Felix Parry last night. By this time the poor boy may be dead; but he has left a legacy of vengeance behind him—"

"Did *you* come here in hopes of collecting it?" sneeringly interrupted Riata Rob, leaning carelessly against one of the wooden columns by which the roof of the piazza was supported, his hands easily resting at his belt, in close proximity to his pistols.

"I came here to learn the whole truth. You are charged with murder by—"

"He lies who makes that charge, and you lie when you repeat it!" fiercely cried the Range Champion.

"The proofs are too plain for easy mistake, Robert Runnover," was the cool, grave retort. "The trail of your horse can be followed directly back to where you staked him out, last night, to run less risk of discovery as you neared the Gridiron. Your tracks can be traced to the very spot now stained by the heart's blood of Felix Parry. In his death-grip was found the medal you won yesterday, and which he tore from your breast as he fell before your knife. Dare you deny this?"

"No, I do not deny one word of all you have just uttered," coldly replied Riata Rob, straightening up again. "It may all be true; for I did ride Red Prince to the Gridiron last night. I did leave him standing at his picket-pin, to creep closer to the building in which— But that don't concern you at all."

"Then—you admit cutting Felix Parry?"

"The hot-headed fellow came upon me unawares. I tried to avoid him, but he wouldn't let it be that way. He cornered me, and then— You best know what ugly devils you've been putting in his brain of late, El Paso, to breed murder! Before high Heaven you are guilty of his death—if death has come upon him!"

"Why did you stab him without warning?"

"The man lies foully who says I did!" flashed Riata Rob, his voice harsh and full of fiercest passion. "If I struck him—and I admit that I did use my knife—it was simply in self-defense. Was I to bear everything? Was I to let the hot-headed boy not only insult me, time and time again, but to spit in my face and then rub it in?"

"I warned him not to crowd me too hard. I said that for—the sake of another person, I could pass over much, but that even my forbearance had its limits, across which he would crowd me at his peril."

"What was his answer? He pulled his gun and tried to shoot me! He did shoot, but I knocked his hand aside, and he wasted his lead. He tried it again, and to save my own life, I cut him!"

"If so, of course you are willing to surrender and take your chance in a fair trial?"

"Surrender? To an infernal bloodhound like you?" harshly laughed Riata Rob. "Did you come here expecting that on my part?"

"I came to take you, dead or alive, Robert Runnover."

"I know you too well—better far than you know me, El Paso, or you'd never trust yourself at such short range!" laughed Riata Rob, throwing up his right hand and firing a shot from his revolver, that sent Owen Taylor to the ground in a heap!

CHAPTER XXXII.

RIATA ROB AT BAY.

STILL clutching the white flag in one hand, Owen Taylor partly lifted his body, drawing a revolver and firing one shot toward the piazza; but it was aimless—the last effort of an indomitable will—and even as the report rung out, his head drooped, and he lay like a dead man.

For a single breath Jason Runnover stood as though spellbound, so completely had that worse than mad action taken him off his guard. But as sharp, angry yells broke from the lips of the horsemen on the prairie beyond, mingling with hasty shots as they surged forward to save or avenge their present leader, the old rancher caught his son in his still athletic arms, swinging him around and actually hurling him inside the house, following after and hastily closing and barring the door.

"Are you mad, boy?" he harshly cried.

But without waiting for a reply, he caught up a rifle and sprang to the window, through the shutter of which loopholes had recently been cut, peering forth and shouting out a stern warning:

"Back, men! The dead-line is close before you, and he who crosses it without leave, will never go back on his own legs! Back, I say!"

To still further emphasize his meaning, Runnover fired a shot into the ground before the irregular charge, the bullet glancing up and onward with a shrill, evil screech of warning.

"'Twas a craven deed, Runnover!" shouted one of the ranchmen, yet heeding the warning so far as to rein in his horse. "To fire on a man under the white flag of truce!"

"What's done is done, Bernard, and it's past undoing now. Don't make it worse by crowding us closer. Pick a man, if you like, and come get your flag-bearer. He brought it on himself by talking too mighty brash!"

"Then—you uphold Riata Rob in what he's done?"

"Riata Rob is my son; we live or hang together!"

There was a brief silence, then Bernard selected a comrade, and together they rode forward, alighting and lifting the limp, seemingly lifeless body of Owen Taylor into a saddle. Supporting him thus, one man walking on each side, they slowly beat a retreat.

Grim and silent, rifles in hand, the Run-over cowboys stood at their stations, waiting for the rush which each and every one knew must come,

sooner or later, after that mad shot upon the flag of truce.

Not one of them all glanced toward Riata Rob, who stood where that fierce impulse had whirled him, pistol still gripped by the hand hanging at his side. Not one—even Billy Black, who was said to believe that the sun rose and set under his young master's hat, stared moodily out at the wildly-excited horsemen on the plain.

His face very pale, and seemingly aged many years within the past day or two, Jason Runnover turned from his loophole and walked slowly toward his son. Twice he seemed about to speak, but each time his parted lips closed again as an unusually fierce yell came from the enemy without. Then, almost savagely, he said:

"What the deuce has come over you, boy? What made you shoot that man? Were you mad—stark, staring mad?"

Riata Rob gave a start, flinging back his head and partly lifting his pistol-hand. There was a wild, unnatural glitter in his gray eyes, and for an instant it seemed as though he was about to assault his own father.

Again an angry chorus came from outside, and with a swift glance over a shoulder, to assure himself from the actions of the cowboys that the enemy was not yet actually charging, Jason Runnover spoke again:

"Do you hear that, Robert? Do you begin to realize what such sounds may mean to both of us?"

"Let the curs yelp!" harshly laughed the Range Champion. "Barking dogs don't dare bite, father."

"You've done enough to make even a cur turn dangerous, Robert!" with a dark frown, his bony hands nervously working together. "I can't understand what all's come over you, boy! You're changed so completely that I hardly recognize my own son!"

"Haven't I had enough to change me, father?"

"Enough to make you hard and stern and vengeful, perhaps, but not enough to— Robert!" with a touch of bitter agony in his tones as his bony fingers closed upon the shoulders of Riata Rob. "I never thought to even hear the charge, much less make it; but—it was the act of a coward, shooting down a man whose hands held nothing worse than a flag of truce!"

"Maybe you'd rather have had me surrender myself into those same innocent hands?" sneeringly asked Riata Rob.

"No. I was ready to fight for you in any way—any way but that foul one! It was worse than madness, Robert!"

"It would have been worse than madness had I permitted him to go scot-free when once I had him fairly beneath my aim. Father," his tones growing calmer, though his eyes still blazed vividly, lighting up his unnaturally pale face. "You don't know that pitiless demon as well as I do—or did, thank Heaven!"

Jason shivered a bit at that invocation. Perhaps he felt that it was blasphemous enough to draw down a bolt of vengeance upon their heads.

"It had to come—I knew it the first time I caught sight of his face—smiling as though all behind it was peace and love and humanity to man! I knew him at a glance, though he has tried to change his looks by shaving off his full beard. And knowing him as I did—"

He broke off abruptly, sweeping a quick, suspicious glance over the cowboys on guard at the windows and door. He seemed to fear that he was talking too freely before so many witnesses, and after taking a look through the loophole at which Billy Black was stationed, seeing that the enemy were gathered about the body of Owen Taylor, now lying on a hastily-constructed pallet of blankets far out on the prairie, he slipped a hand through the arm of the old rancher, leading him into another room, where they might talk without danger of having every word caught and mentally recorded for possible future use.

From that interview Jason Runnover came paler, more haggard than ever, as though what he had there listened to added years to his life. Yet he said nothing when Riata Rob, plainly for the benefit of the cowboys, spoke clearly after their return to the outer room:

"Maybe I was wrong, seeing he hid himself under the white rag; but how could I help it, knowing as I did that he came here, an infernal detective, seeking to entrap me to my death? That he had put in his time for weeks past, undermining my credit and poisoning the minds of my dearest friends with his cunning lies?"

"And only last night—what did he do? Bring up a woman to swear her kid on me, just to ruin my prospects with Sybil Parry!"

A little murmur of indignation against Owen Taylor, and approval of their young master's course in so promptly punishing his treachery, ran around the line of cowboys, and Riata Rob seemed to feel that his breath had not been entirely wasted.

Jason Runnover knew that the excuse was a lying one, but he dared say nothing, even to his son. For, even though that son had discovered him so helplessly bound on his return the night before, Jason Runnover had also lied to keep his bitter secret from that son.

Together they had searched the building for

the bold intruder: a masked man, as the sufferer had sullenly described the one who had so maltreated him; but without finding even a trace of the bold being.

Riata Rob had questioned Billy Black and the other cowboys, but not one of them had seen or heard aught of such an intruder. And as Billy Black declared that he had been on guard all the time, waiting and watching for the return of his young boss, the element of mystery surrounding the incident seemed to grow deeper and deeper.

The hours wore on, wearily enough to those inside Run-over Ranch.

They saw a blanket-litter being shaped for the conveyance of Owen Taylor. They saw him lifted into it, and watched the horses as they slowly passed away over the nearly level plain until they faded out of sight. But not one among them all could say with certainty that the litter contained a corpse or a body with life still lingering in it.

They saw other horsemen riding swiftly away in various directions, while the remainder, rifles in hand, surrounded the ranch as though determined to hold the prey confined until they should see fit to close in and take possession.

"They're sending out to rouse the whole range!" gloomily muttered Jason Runnover. "I wouldn't care a finger-snap for that, only—you made a foul beginning, Robert!"

"It's catching before hanging, father," recklessly laughed Riata Rob. "And maybe we'll fool 'em all, even yet!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE STORMING OF RUN-OVER RANCH.

GLOOMILY enough the besieged watched and waited, silently chafing against inaction, none the less because they must have known that the ending must come right quickly in case a resolute assault was made.

Run-over Ranch had not been built with an eye to standing a deliberately-planned assault, the grim old ranchman depending more on strong hands and stout hearts than on artificial breastworks.

This would have been very well, under anything like ordinary conditions. A dozen well-armed, cool-headed, lusty cowboys such as were now on guard inside Run-over Ranch, could be depended upon to give a good account of anything short of a regular army. But not now.

Their idol was shattered. They knew that Riata Rob had put himself beyond the pale of mercy by shooting down one who stood under the flag which even the heathen feel bound to respect. Even if he was innocent of all the rest attributed to him, this last deed deserved, as it surely would receive, stern punishment.

Jason Runnover saw this change of temper, and if Riata Rob was not entirely blinded by his tumultuous passions, he must have realized as much. If so, he gave no sign.

As the day wore on, the besieged could see reinforcements occasionally arriving, joining the circle stationed around the ranch buildings, and as these arrivals increased in number and frequency, Riata Rob gave vent to a hard, sneering laugh:

"They mean to make sure work of it, father! Look! that runs the list up to over a hundred, I'm reckoning!"

"It means that they want to capture, not shoot you, boy," gloomily frowned the old ranchman.

Just outside of sure range the circle was drawn, the besiegers gathered in little knots and squads, but taking care not to leave a single loophole through which any of the besieged might possibly escape. Beyond this, they made no move that calls for record, until the sun was nearing the western horizon.

"Look!" suddenly ejaculated Riata Rob, from his station at one of the loops, turning his face to cast a swift glance at Jason Runnover. "Yonder comes Judge Slavens, and he isn't under the white flag!"

The old ranchman sprang forward, a hand gripping the other's arm, speaking and peering out through the loop at one and the same time:

"Shoot again, and I'll have you tied down as a lunatic, boy!"

The chief judge at the recent championship trials was indeed riding straight toward the front door of the ranch, but his hands were empty of either flag or weapons, though his actions were those of one who wishes a parley.

"Let him come to the very door if he chooses," hastily said Jason Runnover, flushing red, then turning ghastly pale as he realized how much that unarmed, unguarded approach was meant to convey. "I'll kill the one who dares lift even a finger against him!"

"Hallo—Run-over Ranch!" called out Judge Slavens, coming to a halt when a few yards inside the mark drawn by that treacherous shot which had laid Owen Taylor low.

"What is wanted now, Slavens?" replied Jason Runnover.

"I have been appointed to say these few words: Surrender Robert Runnover to us to answer the charges brought against him, and for his cowardly act in shooting down a man under the protection of a flag of truce. Do this,

and no further action will be taken against you or your men, without full and open warning that such action is considered necessary for the full and complete justification of the law."

"And if I refuse to deliver up my own flesh and blood?"

"Then I was to warn you that we mean to take him, even against your will. And if in doing this, innocent blood be shed upon either side, the consequences must fall upon your head," was the grave reply.

"He is my son; go back and tell those who sent you my words. If they fail to read the riddle, bid them close in and I'll print it in big red letters on as many bodies as possible!"

Judge Slavens wheeled his horse and rode slowly back to his mates. He knew that further parley would be useless, and that if they wanted to take Riata Rob prisoner, they must fight for him.

Still, cool deliberation carried the day, and no positive action was taken until the friendly cover of darkness came to their aid.

Jason Runnover bade Billy Black set out food and drink where all who chose could avail themselves of the refreshment; but though Riata Rob both ate and drank heartily, the old ranchman did neither, standing his guard in grim silence.

He believed that a fight to the death was approaching, but in that fact he saw little to regret, so far as he himself was concerned. And where he would have mourned bitterly over his son, only a few hours before, he felt now that a speedy death would be the greatest blessing fate could bestow upon Riata Rob.

Yet he did not mean to tamely yield to threats or force. That was foreign to his nature. He meant to fight as long as a breath of life remained in his body, dying, if needs be, defending the son of his loins.

The night came on, dark and still, with mist-like clouds covering the canopy and blotting out the stars. This made it easy work for the besiegers to crawl up to close quarters, and Jason Runnover repeatedly warned his men to depend on their ears fully as much as on their eyes for information.

"Blaze away at the first sight or sound you catch, fellows!" recklessly cried Riata Rob, whose flushed countenance and slightly thickened voice told of liberal potations. "It's fight, ye devils! fight from the word jump! Don't forget that there's a rope about each neck among you, and ten-score stout hands out yonder in the dark just itching for a chance to take a stout pull at the lot!"

"I reckon 'tis a rope, boss," slowly said Billy Black, with an echo of sad reproach in his voice as he added: "I never thought to see the day when you'd take so mighty much trouble to twist it tight, boss!"

"Weakening in the knees, Billy Black?" sneered Riata Rob.

"It's the heart o' me, boss, heap more'n the knees."

Before more could be said on either side, Jason Runnover interposed, his voice stern and full of an impatient reproach:

"Do your part as well as Billy Black does his, and none here will cast a slur against your manhood, Robert. Now—hark!"

Not a sound had been caught to denote the enemy were working to effect their main ends, yet from near the front door all could catch a peculiar hissing, spitting sound. And as one of the cowboys peered out through the loop cut in the door itself, he jumped back with a wild ejaculation of alarm.

"Look out! They's a ca'tridge burnin'—"

His sentence was drowned by a thunderous explosion and a shock that cast half their number to the floor, sending the others reeling, staggering blindly, half-stunned and wholly deafened for the moment.

The door was blown inward, shattered to bits, splinters flying in every direction, inflicting wounds that brought cries and shrieks of pain from many lips.

And then, with barely the interval of a single breath between, another explosion shook the ranch from roof to foundation, this time coming from the rear.

"Close in, men!" thundered a clear, commanding voice just without that square of wild confusion. "Club your guns and strike hard, but don't burn powder unless at the last extremity!"

"Rally—shoulder to shoulder, lads!" gasped Jason Runnover, hoarsely, bleeding from an ugly wound above his eyes, yet instinctively facing the now open doorway. "Don't let—Robert, my son!"

There was no answer, or if one came, it was drowned by the wild uproar that followed that desperate charge into the smoke and darkness.

Blows were given and received. Shots were fired. Men came together with a shock in that darkness, grappling and fighting tooth and nail, much as wild beasts are wont to vent their angry passions.

But that double explosion, coming with hardly a second's warning, seemed to utterly demoralize the men of Run-over Ranch, and they fought without order or system. Some, too,

were only too willing to cry aloud for quarter, having lost heart ever since that dastardly shot at Owen Taylor.

Almost at the first of that charge through the ruined door, Jason Runnover went down under a heavy blow, and lacking both his and the voice of Riata Rob, the cowboys quickly lost the little heart they had for desperate fighting.

"Up hands and empty, then!" cried Judge Slavens, himself standing at the threshold with a revolver in each hand. "Throw the lights inside, lads! Let's see what it all amounts to, anyway!"

Instantly a blinding sheet of light was thrown past him into the disordered room, the assailants who had effected an entrance falling back to the wall, their pistols cocked and ready for swift use in case of further resistance.

"We cave, judge," said Billy Black, wiping the blood from his face as it flowed from an ugly scalp-wound, inflicted by one of the flying splinters. "The boss is down, an' that lets us out. 'Twas a dirty end we hed to hold up, an' that helps—mightily!"

"Where's Riata Rob?" sternly demanded Slavens, vainly trying to discover the young ranchero.

"Hain't hearn a yelp out o' him sence afore the 'sposion," faintly replied Black, leaning against the wall to steady himself. "Reckon he's down, too!"

"Drop your guns and come outside. Keep your hands up, for we mean pure business from this on!"

The cowboys obeyed in silence, well content that they were granted even so much grace, for they felt that their lives had been forfeited by the treacherous conduct of the one who, only a few brief hours before, they had fairly idolized as little less than a god!

By Judge Slavens's orders, each man was wholly disarmed and placed under guard as the threshold was crossed; and when all who were able to walk of their own accord had been secured after this fashion, Jason Runnover and the other injured were picked up and carried out of the building.

Then close and thorough search was made throughout Run-over Ranch for Riata Rob, but in vain. He was not among the prisoners. He was not dead. He had simply vanished as though he had taken wings and flown away!

The men who had been stationed at close intervals around the ranch were questioned, but without throwing any light on the mystery. One and all declared that they had kept such close and vigilant watch that no human being could possibly have slipped unseen through their ranks, either before or after the double explosion.

Yet the fact remained that Riata Rob had escaped!

The captive cowboys were questioned, but they could tell nothing more than all knew: Riata Rob had last been heard bidding them fight like devils; but that was several minutes before the explosion came.

Jason Runnover was restored to consciousness, his wound proving to be nothing really dangerous to life. A splinter had torn an ugly gash above his brows, giving him barely time to utter those few gasping words before insensibility came over his brain.

But he, too, could or would give no explanation, even when savagely threatened with the rope if he persisted in shielding his recreant son.

"Hang him anyway, darn it!" growled one fierce rancher, coming forward with a lariat ready noosed. "He deserves it fer shootin' down a man that had trusted to honor an' a flag o' truce!"

"No—don't!" cried Billy Black. "The young boss did it! The old boss tried his best to stop him, but wasn't quite quick enough! Ef you dar' to rope him, you'll be doin' a murder jest as dirty!"

"We'll hold him as a hostage for Riata Rob," decided Slavens.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WIDOW KATE MAKES CONFESSION.

It was two days after the rustle at Run-over Ranch.

Nothing had been seen or heard of Riata Rob since that momentous night, though eager parties had been almost constantly scouring the prairies ever since, gradually extending their operations until the search widened to the very confines of that vast range.

Not even a trail was found. And among some of the more superstitious it was beginning to be whispered that, maybe, Satan himself had taken a hand in that little rustle, saving his favorite for future services in another field.

For it had come to that! From little less than a god in public estimation, the Range Champion had fallen lower than Lucifer himself!

Only a few still clung to their faith and belief that, when all was made clear to mortal eyes, Riata Rob would shine out once more in true-blue colors. Among them were Widow Kate, Sybil Parry and Jason Runnover.

Though the latter was plainly hurt to the very heart by the desertion of his son, just when he

might have in part redeemed his credit by making a stout fight beside that father, his lips were rigidly locked against all threats or persuasions. He had naught to say.

He was kept in confinement, to await trial for taking part in the shooting of Owen Taylor, who was lying very low—at the point of death, as many believed—in a room at the Gridiron Ranch.

"Sure, it's a hospital sign I'm thinking about hanging on in front of me castle," laughed Widow Kate, on that second day, as she greeted Sybil Parry, who had ridden over from Good Luck Ranch to visit her brother.

Felix was lying very low, though Dr. Beeman still gave hopes of his ultimate recovery. The greatest drawback to his mending seemed to lie in his restless longing for vengeance on Riata Rob, whose mysterious escape from Run-over Ranch it had been impossible to keep from him.

Time and again he repeated that black charge against the Range Champion, declaring fiercely as his weakened condition would permit, that Riata Rob had stabbed him without warning, without giving him the slightest chance to defend himself.

This vindictive spirit made it painful enough for Sybil to sit by his side, but she came every day to pass an hour or two with him. There was none other to come: Arnold Parry was confined to his bed from the effects of that fall of his horse, added to the bitter anxiety he had endured on account of his only son.

Gunter Klam had recovered sufficiently to leave the Gridiron, and he even joined in the hunt for Riata Rob, though Widow Kate held his parole to return each night until she gave him full liberty.

Pepita Ramon, too, was doing far better than any one had dared hope for. Her wound was free from fever, and if her mind could have been set at rest, Dr. Beeman declared that a couple of weeks would put her on her feet again.

On the day in question Felix Parry was unusually trying to his sister, constantly raving against Riata Rob, bemoaning the bitter black luck that held him flat on his back when men were needed to scent out and run down the dastardly villain.

This was all the harder to bear, since Sybil did not dare defend her lover, even while each threat, curse or taunt stung her to the very quick, making her poor heart bleed. Contradiction would only increase the young man's fever through inflaming his passions, and so, sick at heart and intolerably weary, the poor girl forced herself to sit out her prescribed hour before seeking much needed relief.

"Ye poor little girleen!" murmured Widow Kate, sympathetically, as she met Sybil at the door of the sick-room. "Don't I know what ye've been through? Haven't I had to sit and listen and suffer torments every night since, faith?"

She insisted on Sybil's taking a bite and sip, the latter consisting of a little pure whisky which, despite its vulgar name, proved very beneficial on this occasion, and exactly what the girl needed to brace her up after all she had undergone of late.

And then, when Sybil insisted that she must return home, as her father would not rest easy until he had received her daily report as to how Felix was progressing, Widow Kate ordered her own horse brought to the door with that of her fair guest.

"Niver a word, now, sweetie," she declared, slapping a broad, white palm over Sybil's lips. "Sure, dear, it's for my own good that I'm wanting the ride. Och! this keeping a hospital is the very—ahem! And if I couldn't get out where I might stretch the tongue o' me a bit, widout sthopping to think will I be disturbing the patients too much, I dunno! it's dead and buried I'd need to be inside the week, sure!"

But for all that, Widow Kate seemed hardly to know just how to break the silence that fell over them both when the Gridiron was fairly cleared. She knew just what she had determined she ought to say, but with that pale, worn, sad face so near to her elbow, those words were very hard to utter.

But Widow Kate Malin was not a woman to shirk what she deemed to be her bounden duty, and as the easiest method of getting around to what she had taken this ride expressly to utter, she began talking of Pepita Ramon and her little child.

"I never thought to say that same of a Mexican—least of all about a girl that's won and worn what I once hoped to have for my very own, sure! But if Pepita isn't an angel, then there niver was one come down to this bright earth of ours!"

Sybil started, shrinking away from the speaker, her face filled with pain that was not wholly unmixed with indignation. But Widow Kate simply pressed her horse nearer, leaning over and clasping Sybil's hand again in hers as she earnestly spoke again:

"It's hurting ye I am, girly, and it's bitter cruel you're thinking me this minute for touching the sore with such a rude hand. But what if it is the Gospel truth, Sybil, sister?"

"It is not—I'll never believe it!" passionately cried the tortured maiden. "You are cruel to

even hint at such a thing. Robert never was anything to that vile creature! How could he be, when he—"

"When he was making love to another girl?" steadily finished the widow, deeming it best to be cruel in order to be kind. "Listen to me, Sybil Parry, and I'll make full and free confession to you, even though so doing makes you my enemy for life."

"I, too, loved Robert Runnover. Stop! don't make a mistake, now. I said that I loved him, not he loved me—worse luck I used to think that same, too!" with a tinge of bitterness in her soft laugh.

"I loved him just as madly as ever other woman loved; maybe to the full as tenderly as you loved him, girl! And loving him that way, think you I'd be easily convinced of his wickedness? Yet—I'm talking to you as I would to a father confessor, Sybil! I know now that Robert Runnover is evil to the very core!"

"I will not listen to such cruel words!" passionately cried Sybil as she spurred up her horse; but Mrs. Malin kept close to her side.

"You'll thank me for them, when you've had time to think them all over, Miss Parry," was the earnest continuation. "I have questioned Pepita Ramon closely. I have sifted her story from end to end, and now I know that she told nothing more than the truth when she called Robert Runnover her husband and the father of her child."

"'Tis false—a bitter black lie!" panted Sybil, feverishly.

"'Tis truth, and I'm only giving you warning to prepare for its being made so clear that not a living mortal can help but believe in it, from start to finish!" as earnestly declared Mrs. Malin. "I'm praying that the poor, wild, misguided lad may escape his enemies, even if he does deserve punishment; but at the same time I'm feeling it my duty to make the whole truth clear. And as the quickest way to do that, I'm going to send down to Pepita's home for her mother and the priest who married her to Riata Rob!"

"I'll never believe them—I'll never forgive you for taking part against him! And from this hour—"

"Will ye look at that, now!" abruptly cried Widow Kate, wrenching up her horse and stretching out an arm toward a swiftly-approaching horse and rider, who seemed bent on intercepting them.

Such was their first and most natural impression, but as the wild rider came nearer they recognized the form and drapery of a woman; and then Widow Kate cried out sharply:

"'Tis not chasing us—'tis a runaway! Holy Mother! the bridle has broken, and the *barranca* it right ferninst them!"

She spurred her horse forward, wildly waving an arm and shouting forth a warning of peril ahead; but to no effect. The horse was blind with fright. The woman was powerless to check him, and she surely did not comprehend the peril ahead, or that wild warning.

Then—they averted their eyes with a shudder of horror!

CHAPTER XXXV.

HOW RIATA ROB WAS CAPTURED.

It may be doubted whether the woman riding the runaway horse ever fairly realized the peril which menaced her with a frightful death.

By the swaying of her body she seemed trying to swerve the course of her maddened mount far enough aside to avoid the women in front, but at the same time she kept casting glances over her shoulder, like one who is fleeing from some dreaded enemy or great peril. And it was while her gaze was turned backward that the fear-blinded animal reached the edge of the *barranca*, just at its widest, deepest part.

The doomed creature tried to pause, to swerve, but it was too late. Its rider looked around, but the scream which fear of death wrung from her lips was cut short by contact with the rocks far below.

Sybil covered her eyes, shivering, gasping with horror. Mrs. Malin was fully as pale, but after that first instinctive recoil, she sprang from the saddle and ran to the edge of the *barranca*, opposite the point where the unknown had gone over.

She took one reluctant glance. That showed her enough. She turned and moved unsteadily back to where Sybil still sat with hidden eyes, speaking hurriedly but clearly:

"There may be a chance, though 'tis but one in a thousand. 'Tis nearest to Good Luck; ride there as quick as your nag'll bear ye, dear, and send back men to help. Quick! and keep praying that it may do some good, though I'm doubting—bitterly doubting!"

"And you?"

"I'll be waiting to keep— They'll find me here, waiting. Go—and tell the men to use their spurs and spare not!"

Sybil dashed away at top speed. She could do that better than remain there. With her nerves so badly shattered, it would have seemed worse than death for her to stop, much less do what Widow Kate was even then bracing up her courage to perform.

"She may be living! It's my duty—brace up, ye coward!"

Only pausing to throw her reins over a rosin-weed, as token to her horse that he was expected to wait patiently and not roam, thus acting as a guide to the party from Good Luck when it should come to the rescue, Widow Kate stole another glance down at that gruesome sight lying among the loose rocks at the bottom of the *barranca*.

The horse was dead, beyond all doubt. She could see its shattered skull twisted about and then turned upward, in plain sight. But the rider? There was no motion, no sound, and yet—there was barely a chance that she had escaped with life.

It would have been easier for Mrs. Malin to have faced half a dozen drunken bucks in war-paint, with but her own arm and a revolver as means of defense, but she knew that duty called her to descend into that death-trap and do what might lie in her power for the unfortunate unknown. And seeking the nearest point where such a descent was practicable, she began the task.

Even before she came within sight of that ghastly spectacle Mrs. Malin caught the sounds of choking cries and wild snatches of speech. She paused with a superstitious thrill, for it did not seem possible that a mortal being could have survived that fearful leap, even for a single breath. Then—

"Ruperto—my baby—son—"

Widow Kate sprang forward with a wondering cry, startled no less by hearing that name than by the ghastly sight which met her gaze.

The woman had fallen clear of her horse, and was now half-leaning on the mangled carcass, swaying from side to side, moaning and gasping, only now and then uttering an articulate word or name.

And that name was always Ruperto—Robbie—or *Riata Rob*.

Mrs. Malin hardly knew what she said or did during the next few minutes. Reason told her that the woman was beyond all earthly help, yet she sought to lend her relief from her sufferings, which must have been horrible. She likewise tried to learn what connection there might be between her and Riata Rob, and where he was now hiding.

Of the last she could win naught, but she heard the dying woman call on her son, her noble boy, and she knew that this must indeed be Riata Rob's mother!

Then—with her last spark of life going out in a mad, crazy struggle to wreak vengeance on Jason Runnover, the poor creature sunk down dead at the feet of the widow, who restrained her with kind force.

Mrs. Malin paused long enough to satisfy herself that a merciful death had indeed come to the rescue; then, sick, faint, shivering from top to toe, she turned away from the spot, feeling that she was in a grave!

It tasked her shaken nerves to the utmost, scaling those steep rocks, and when she gained the level she sunk down exhausted.

Not until that instant did she realize how completely she had lost her nerve. For, instead of taking the side on which she had left her horse, and on which the rescuing party must come up, she had scaled the opposite bank, and would have to cross that horrible *barranca* once more.

Now that she had left that gruesome sight behind, Widow Kate rapidly "braced up" and was rising with the intention of recrossing the *barranca*, when she chanced to look in the opposite direction, catching sight of a footman who was rapidly approaching the spot where she stood, waving a hat over his head and calling out to attract her notice.

Her first thought was of danger, and a hand quickly sought out the useful revolver which she habitually carried when in the saddle; but in another breath she recognized the footman: Gunter Klam!

"Found! I've caught him, Widow Kate!" panted the detective, pressing a hand to his wounded side, his face pale with fatigue, thanks to his yet green wounds, but with a fierce triumph gleaming in his little eyes and echoing through his words.

"Found who?" panted Mrs. Malin, a tight hand seeming to close over her heart. "Not—"

"Robert Runnover—no less!"

"Where is he? Not— If you've killed him, Gunter Klam—"

"I swore to take him dead or alive—but it's alive for choice, Mrs. Malin," chuckled the detective, recovering his wind and something of his ordinary coolness at one and the same time. "I found him by dogging the old woman, and when she skipped—"

"She's dead—down yonder!" shivered Widow Kate, with a shy glance toward the deep ditch.

"Hard lines for her, but—well, it makes everything a heap sight easier for me," smiled Gunter Klam, rubbing his hands briskly together like one who has not another care left to trouble him. "I found Riata Rob by watching and dogging her. Found him dead drunk and sleeping. I crawled up and bound him snugly enough, then took the risk of leaving him as he lay, to hurry after help to carry him to the Gridiron."

While he was giving this hurried account of his wonderful good-luck, Widow Kate was conquering her own weakness, and deciding on the proper plan to follow. Even yet she hated to believe Riata Rob such an utter villain, though the proofs were heaping up so high against him. And though she would not take a step to run him away from a fair, lawful trial, she resolved that he should not fall into the grip of lynch-law before he had at least a chance to prove his innocence.

"Listen!" she said, speaking rapidly, earnestly. "I've sent Sybil Parry to Good Luck after men to help care for the poor woman down yonder. You must not be seen by them—you must not let another soul know of the discovery you have made. Look! they are coming, already!"

Far away over the level plain there rose a tiny cloud of dust, which Widow Kate knew was caused by swiftly-flying hoofs.

"Where did you find Riata Rob?"

"In the little cave in the river bank!"

"Good! Go back there as quickly as possible, and guard him against every one else until my coming. I'll call your name, so you can know it is my party. Go—before those fellows can recognize you, man! I'll bring help to carry your captive to the Gridiron, just as soon as it grows dark enough to safely cover our movements! Off wid ye, man!"

Gunter Klam turned and ran off at remarkable speed for a man who had been picked up for dead but such a short time before. He might suffer for his present excitement, when all was over, but just now he seemed to forget his hurts in the first flush of his triumph.

Widow Kate crossed the *barranca*, and if her face showed traces of agitation when the rescuing party came up, none of the cowboys thought strange of it. After such an experience nothing was more natural.

Under her directions, the cowboys brought the corpse up from the *barranca*, wrapped in blankets. They were bidden convey it to Good Luck Ranch, as the nearest point, Mrs. Malin stating that she meant the poor unknown should at least be given Christian burial.

She waited until they were fairly on their way, then mounted and rode at speed back to the Gridiron, to complete her plans for removing Riata Rob from the river-cave to her own home.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHAT RIATA ROB HAD TO TELL.

WITH a house so crowded with invalids as was the Gridiron by this time, it was altogether out of the question to keep the arrival of Robert Runnover a secret from all, and Widow Kate made no such attempt.

Knowing that she could place implicit confidence in all her men, she fully trusted them. And also feeling that she had only Felix Parry to dread of those inside the building, she confined her precautions to keeping him ignorant of the arrival of this new patient.

For patient Riata Rob surely was, though until Dr. Beeman examined him, the belief was that strong liquor alone held him in such a heavy stupor; a stupor so complete that only for his slow breathing and the feverish warmth of his skin, one might easily have deemed him dead.

"He has attempted to poison himself, or else has had some strange and, as yet, unknown drug administered to him by an enemy," gravely declared the physician, after that careful examination.

"Bracing up" on a fresh bottle of good whisky, Dr. Beeman fell to work according to his best judgment, and knowing that she could be of no service just then, Widow Kate, with Gunter Klam, paid another visit to Pepita, from whom the momentous secret had been kept.

The detective kept himself in the background, but using his ears "for all that was out," while Widow Kate once more carefully questioned Pepita about the man whom she claimed to be her lawful husband.

She repeated her pathetic story, without deviation. And finally Mrs. Malin gave over in despair. Riata Rob Runnover surely was this injured woman's legal husband!

It was not until another sun had risen that the skill of Dr. Beeman won its fit reward, and brought the light of consciousness, of reason, back to the eyes of Riata Rob. He seemed to marvel at his weakness, pressing a hand to his head as he strove to rise up in bed.

"What—who hit me?" he muttered, staring about him with a puzzled frown. "Sybil—that woman, and—"

"Roberto—my own love!" hysterically sobbed Pepita, drawn from her bed by the sound of that loved voice. "I knew you would come back to Pepita and— Oh, my love! my darling!"

Riata Rob was fairly borne back beneath that ecstatic rush, and for a few moments he could only gasp out his angry bewilderment, vainly trying to unclasp those fair arms and put away the woman who was half-crazed at once more finding herself in his arms.

It seemed a cruel act to perform, but Widow Kate caught Pepita in her own strong arms,

drawing her back from the bed on which Riata Rob was lying. And holding the poor creature tightly, she cried out:

"Robert Runnoyer, as you must some day answer at the Judgment Bar, tell me this: is this woman your lawful wife?"

"As God hears me, she is not, never was, never will be!" almost fiercely cried the Range Champion. "I never saw her before to-night. Or—Is it still—How long has it been since that coward blow in the dark struck me down?"

Poor Pepita thus fiercely denied, sunk insensible in Mrs. Malin's arms and was tenderly carried back to her couch. Mrs. Malin watched beside her, after she was revived, and patiently bore with her until the opiate administered by the doctor took effect, sending her off into a sound slumber.

By this time Riata Rob had regained a goodly portion of his old strength of both mind and body, and was only too anxious to tell his story, which was so strange that even Widow Kate, dearly as she would have liked to believe him, could hardly force herself to place full credence in what he declared to be the Gospel truth.

"I never saw the woman," declared Riata Rob, his gray eyes glowing vividly. "I never even knew that such a creature drew the breath of life until last—until that night, when she flung her child at my head and branded me as worse than a dastardly villain!"

"I don't know what I said and did. The cruel shame made me half-crazy, I reckon. For—it all took place before the eyes of my promised bride—the only woman I ever loved, or ever can love!"

"Then—she stabbed herself, falling at my feet, dead as I thought—as all must have thought. And—Sybil turned from me! That finished the bitter blow, and I was sick—so sick that, dog-like, I only thought of creeping away into the darkness where none could see or hear me."

"I staggered off into the night, neither knowing nor caring where I went, only trying to get away from the crowd. And then—some one leaped out of the timber and struck me a heavy blow on the head!"

Widow Kate bit her lips sharply to keep back a cry. Gunter Klam turned pale, a puzzled, worried look coming into his little eyes. But Riata Rob paid no attention to either, seemingly trying to recall what had happened him next.

"I don't exactly know," he said, speaking slowly, almost painfully. "I was not quite senseless, though, at first. I knew, like one in a dream, that rough hands were binding and gagging me, then hurrying me into the timber. After that—I could recall a nightmare dream far more clearly!" with a dark, troubled frown coming over his face.

"I know that people came to talk to me. I can remember a man's face and the face of a woman. I know the woman reviled me savagely, trying to torture me after a spiteful, womanish manner. But the drug that held me so helpless also helped to foil her malice. I could hear and feel, but it was just as one hears and feels in a dream."

"Then you know nothing of all that has happened since that night?" slowly asked Widow Kate, her face very pale, her eyes filled with conflicting doubt and joyous conviction.

"Nothing, but—Sybil?" faltered Riata Rob, tremulously, a pitiful anxiety coming into his eyes as he waited for the answer to his incomplete question.

"She is well—as well as can be, when such bitter black charges are still standing against the name of the man she loves so tenderly."

"Does she—That woman?"

"Her faith is perfect. She declares that you are innocent of each and every charge brought against you. Only to-day—Well, I thought meself lucky to escape wid both eyes safe in the head o' me, faith!" laughed Widow Malin.

"Thank Heaven for that! I can bear all the rest!" fervently breathed Riata Rob, letting his head sink back on his pillow.

At this point Dr. Beeman interposed, declaring that he would not be accountable for the brain of his patient unless he was permitted to rest in peace and quiet for at least several hours. After that—he would see!

Fairly driving them out of the room, Dr. Beeman made a careful examination of Riata Rob's head, finding a severe contusion, which he had not before taken note of. Then, giving him a sleeping draught, he settled himself on guard-duty, with a box of cigars and a decanter of good whisky as allies.

Being thus banished, Widow Kate and Gunter Klam consulted together and tried their best to solve that perplexing riddle. If Riata Rob had told the truth, he could not have stabbed Felix Parry; could not have shot down Owen Taylor under the white flag; could not have brought almost death on Jason Runnoyer and the Run-over cowboys, only to steal away under cover of the assault, like a cowardly craven!

But if not Riata Rob, who else could have wrought those evil deeds?

"Pepita's husband, beyond a reasonable doubt," gravely declared Gunter Klam, thoughtfully tugging at his short beard. "If the man

in yonder is really that husband, then he is the criminal. If not—well, time enough to ask who else, when his shoulders are cleared of this shameful load!"

"But how can that be done?" asked the sorely-perplexed widow.

"The woman must do it, and you must help her," grimly nodded the little detective. "She lived long enough with that husband to know him from top to toe. You must learn from her if her Robert Runnoyer, or Ruperto Ramon, had any peculiarity which could not be erased without leaving a scar—Ha!" with sudden emphasis, his little eyes all aglow. "A man who led such a wild, reckless life as Ruperto Ramon surely did not escape without some significant memento—some scar which can be identified! Ask her this—ask her if she can swear to her husband by any such mark or blemish! Then—"

"If a similar mark or scar or blemish is found on Riata Rob, it will prove him the dirty villain, and I'll hand him over to the law before he can catch his second breath, sure!" excitedly cried Widow Kate, springing to her feet and at once rushing off to visit Pepita.

It was a lucky thought on the part of Gunter Klam, and Widow Kate called him in to hear Pepita describe a curiously-shaped scar which her husband bore just below his heart. And then, when word came that Riata Rob was awake and in his sober senses, the trio paid him a visit, Widow Kate briefly describing the test proposed.

And with a light laugh, Riata Rob bared his breast to show—not even the slightest trace of a scar above his manly heart!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RIATA ROB'S DOUBLE.

WHEN an inkling of the marvelous truth leaked out, all the range was agog, and once more the lines of partisanship were drawn, those who believed in Riata Rob taking one side, while the other was occupied by those who could not yet take stock in a miracle of the sort proclaimed aloud by Widow Kate Malin and her closest friends.

There was some ugly talk of lynch-law, and even some sort of demonstrations made that looked toward a long rope and a short shrift; but Widow Kate bluntly declared that only by walking over her dead body could they hope to lay even the weight of a finger on Riata Rob. She backed this declaration up with solid actions, placing the Gridiron under arms, forming an inner circle of guards from her own tried cowboys, then adding others such as she could hire, until it would have taken an army to have carried the Gridiron by storm, or a ghost to have run the gantlet of all those alert guards.

Sybil Parry came to see Riata Rob, and, despite the perplexing mystery which still hung over their heads, the lovers were supremely happy for the time being. Hardly the less so because Felix Parry, now first learning of Robert Runnoyer's presence under the same roof, hotly demanded to be carried out—to die in a ditch, if needs be; anything rather than share the same hospitality with that evil-hearted, crime-stained villain.

Widow Kate obliged him; helping to prepare a blanket litter with her own fair hands. And she only seemed able to draw a fair, full, free breath after she saw Felix safely deposited beneath the roof of Good Luck Ranch.

"Never a thank need ye thank me, Mr. Felix Parry," she said, bowing profoundly as she backed away from the couch upon which the wounded youth had been placed. "Sure, I niver thought to be under such tremendous obligations to living mortal, as I am to you for this same chance to bid ye good-by and many returns of the happy hour, sir!"

Without pausing to see if Felix caught and understood her double meaning, Widow Kate left the building and sprang lightly into the saddle. She rode swiftly away, but hardly in a direct line toward the Gridiron.

First, she wanted time in which to calm down, for her blood was still at boiling heat, and she felt totally unfit for company. Then, too, a restless hope urged her on when she thought of taking a circuit that would touch at Run-over Ranch.

This was drawing near the close of the second day since the return of Riata Rob, and the mystery surrounding him was still impenetrable to all. And even Widow Kate began to fear that the only possible clew had been buried in the grave which hid from mortal sight the mangled remains of Dolores—was it Runnoyer?

Widow Kate was asking herself this question as she sat moodily gazing at deserted Run-over Ranch, unheeding the setting sun or the near approach of twilight.

"If he would only open the lips o' him and tell what he knows!" she muttered, with a long-drawn sigh, thinking of Jason Runnoyer, and the fruitless visit she had made to him in captivity.

She turned her horse and was on the point of riding away toward home, when a clear voice called out:

"Widow Kate—Mrs. Malin!"

She turned her head, giving a sharp cry of

mingled wonder, joy and angry vengeance as she caught a fair view of that face and figure, the owner of which had apparently just emerged from the front of Run-over Ranch.

"Riata—Ruperto Ramon!"

"Flag of truce, Widow Kate!" he laughed, holding up an open hand, even while he held her horse covered with a pistol gripped in his right. "I beg of you to listen to a few words, and not force me to kill that noble animal of yours."

"I'll kill you!" flashed Mrs. Malin, wrenching her horse around and drawing her revolver as she came charging straight at the man.

Ruperto Ramon dropped his weapon, throwing up both hands, a bitter yet sad smile on his handsome face as he spoke rapidly:

"Shoot, and let the real facts of Riata Rob's double life die with the report of your gun, Mrs. Malin!"

"I'll do better, sure! I'll take ye prisoner and force ye—"

"Would you rather have a speechless captive than a full and free confession in your hands, Mrs. Malin?"

"We'll wring the whole truth from ye with hot irons, if need be!"

"You might kill, but you could never weaken. No, Mrs. Malin. I came to tell you everything. I risked my life to thank you for—She was my mother, madam, and wicked though she may have seemed to others, who were ignorant of her wrongs, I loved her! And when I learned that she was dead—when I knew that you, dear madam, had given her Christian burial—my hard heart softened, and I resolved to confess all."

"Then—you played Riata Rob?" almost breathlessly asked Widow Kate, for the moment actually forgetting that she held a cocked revolver in her hand.

"Faith for faith, Widow Kate!" the strange being said, smiling faintly as he slowly moved closer to the woman on horseback. "I can explain everything that has bothered you and so many others of late. I will make this explanation—on conditions!"

"And what may those conditions be, man, dear?" curiously asked the widow, won despite her will by that handsome face, so marvelously like that of the young man for whose love, only a few days ago, she was ready to plot and plan, if not actually break the laws.

"I know how tenderly you have cared for little Pepita and her boy, Mrs. Malin," his tones softening, his manner growing still more gentle. "That, with your noble action in regard to my poor mother, has taken all the iron out of my nature. And if you will add one more kind deed to your noble record, I'll not only cover your memory with gratitude, but place in your hands all the proofs you can possibly ask for to clear the honor and truth of Robert Runnoyer!"

"Will ye—can ye do all that, man, dear?" eagerly cried Widow Kate, no longer remembering that she was confronting a self-admitted criminal.

"I can and will, if on your part you solemnly swear that when Pepita is able to travel, you will not only let her go free and unquestioned, but send her to such a spot as I may designate, hereafter."

"Is this too much to ask, dear lady?" his voice a trifle husky, his eyes filling with an anxious, pleading light as his empty hands reached out appealingly. "Must you visit my sins on her innocent head?"

"Then—she is your wife?"

"As surely as the laws of man and Heaven can make her!"

"Yet—you taught her to heap bitter shame on both herself and another! You bade her claim another man as her lawful husband! You—"

"As Heaven hears me, Mrs. Malin, I did nothing of all this! I never knew Pepita was in Texas, even! That was my mother's work, and part of her own private plans to— But I cannot accuse her in words," he abruptly broke off, his head drooping, his athletic figure shivering. "I have written it out in full, as she confessed it all to me, after our first blow was dealt. I will give you this confession, to use as your best judgment dictates—on conditions."

"Will that written confession be sufficient? People may still doubt and refuse to believe, for they all know I'm Riata Rob's friend."

"It has already been proven that he is not Pepita's husband. This paper will clear him of all else. Or, if it fails, I pledge you my word to come and surrender myself to meet all charges against him, if I fail to clear his honor by less heroic means!"

Widow Kate leaned forward in the saddle, gazing long and keenly into that darkly handsome face. Then, stretching out a hand, she cried:

"I'll trust ye, man! There's no lie in those gray eyes, or I'm a bat! I'll give ye the pledge, and I'll keep it to the letter. I'll send Pepita and her baby wherever you say. But—"

Ruperto Ramon took a sealed paper from his bosom, placing it in her hand, speaking rapidly: "You will find everything explained in that, Mrs. Malin. And, to make all sure, I'll sign it with you as witness."

He produced a stylographic pen, signing his

name in bold characters, and Widow Kate wrote her name below. She placed the precious document in her bosom, then slowly said:

"I'm trusting ye more than I ever thought to trust mortal man, Ruperto Ramon. Maybe I ought to arrest ye, but—you can go! If this paper fails to do what you swear, I'll hunt ye down to the gallows if it takes twenty years!"

"It will not fail, but if it should, I'll save you that trouble by coming to meet you more than half-way, Mrs. Malin. Then—you hold my wife and son as security!"

With that, Ruperto Ramon turned and walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HOW THE RUSTLE PANNED OUT.

DURING her solitary ride homeward, Mrs. Malin had ample time for deciding on her proper course to pursue, and no sooner was she safely inside the Gridiron Ranch with her precious document than she called Gunter Klam, Dr. Beeman, John Morgan and Owen Taylor—the latter confined to his bed, but able to listen, if he could not talk much—to a council.

She told them all that had occurred, and showing them the packet, its seals still unbroken, asked them what had best be done.

"Tell best men—call together—open, read, then let decide," promptly answered Owen Taylor.

And so it was finally decided. Each one of the council signed the paper, which they saw placed under lock and key for safe-keeping.

Word was sent out early the next morning, and Widow Kate politely received each arrival, supplying them with refreshments to kill time until the party should be complete.

Jason Runnover was one of the number, his limbs at liberty, though he was still considered as under guard.

Grim, defiant, unshaken as to nerve, the master of Run-over Ranch stood erect, refusing the seat offered him by Widow Kate, making no sign even when she whispered in his ear that Riata Rob was nearly himself again, and would shortly join the company.

And when the Range Champion, pale, haggard, plainly showing the bad effects of all he had undergone since that stunning blow fell upon him, just as all the world seemed bright and glorious, entered the room, Jason Runnover simply shot one vivid glance toward his son, then returned to his grimly statuesque composure.

Widow Kate briefly stated her interview with Ruperto Ramon, then produced the packet, its seal still unbroken, placing it into the hands of Judge Slavens.

He gravely caused each signature to be identified, then broke the seals and cleared his throat for the purpose of reading the contents aloud.

The story was a long one, though written out clearly and as succinctly as well could be; too long for a verbatim report here.

The record began with events which transpired long years before the present date, and almost the first sentence broke that icy calm which Jason Runnover had imposed upon himself.

It mentioned his marriage to Dolores Ramon, and went on to tell of the sad tragedy which followed that ill-fated match; of how Dolores never fully recovered from the birth of her first child, Robert; of how she grew morbidly suspicious of the husband she loved so passionately. It told of how she took a furious dislike of a neighboring lady, on more than one occasion accusing her of trying to alienate her husband's affections, and then, one dark night, of how she flung herself into the river that flowed through their estate.

It told of the husband's apparent grief, and of the long search which was made for the corpse; of how one was at length discovered, terribly disfigured; of how it was buried for all that remained of Mrs. Runnover. And then the paper went on to tell how ugly suspicions grew and flourished, some one starting the rumor that Jason Runnover had strangled his wife because she discovered him in an intrigue with the fair neighbor of whom his wife was so insanely jealous.

It briefly passed over the storm that arose, before which Jason Runnover was obliged to flee in order to save his life.

"'Twas a foul lie!" muttered Runnover, huskily. "I loved her more than my own soul!"

The document then went on to speak of Paquita Ramon, the twin-sister to Dolores, though they had been separated since early childhood.

It told how Paquita brooded over the sad fate of her sister, until she lived only for vengeance. It explained how she trained her only son, the writer of this confession, teaching him to swear eternal vengeance upon all who bore the name of Runnover.

This vengeance was delayed for many years, because Paquita went insane; but when she recovered her senses, she fell briskly to work.

The document went on to relate at full length much which has already been placed before the reader, and which need not be repeated now. Enough that Paquita, with Ruperto and a couple of trusty men, captured Jason Runnover and

put him under the influence of a drug, then forced him to witness what purported to be glimpses of his past and his future life, in which Paquita represented Dolores, and Ruperto made up as Riata Rob.

It was Paquita's work, bringing the wife and babe of Ruperto to the festival. He knew nothing of all that until it was over, for he was then watching for a chance to capture Riata Rob and step into his place, to more perfectly ruin him in the eyes of his lady-love and his neighbors. This he did, when Riata Rob staggered away from the pavilion, exchanging clothes with him, taking his medal, and even cutting the back of his left hand, the more perfectly to carry out the disguise.

In all that followed, Ruperto took part. He met and stabbed Felix Parry, contriving it so that his medal should be found with the wounded man. He fired that dastardly shot at Owen Taylor, and he made the capture or death of Jason Runnover certain by so doing.

When the assault was fully assured, he escaped from Run-over Ranch by the same secret passage through which Paquita Ramon fled, after torturing the man she falsely claimed as her husband.

"I knew, but I wouldn't tell," muttered Runnover, as all eyes turned toward him at that. "I thought my boy was a coward as well as an assassin—God forgive me!"

Ruperto Ramon also confessed that he had shot down Gunter Klam, leaving him for dead, when the detective tried to arrest him, on the night before the championship trials were to come off.

He told how Riata Rob was kept in a secure place, under the influence of drugs, until it was time for his capture, that the hangman's rope might end his life. He explained how Paquita Ramon attracted the attention of Gunter Klam, leading the little detective to the river-cave, where Riata Rob had recently been conveyed under cover of night.

And when certain that her victim would be found, she had ridden away, to unexpectedly meet her death, owing to a fright taken by her spirited horse.

It was this tragic death that first caused Ruperto Ramon to weaken in his vow of revenge. And when he learned that his mother had been given Christian burial, by those whom he was scheming against; when he reflected how tenderly his wronged wife and her babe had been cared for by those same parties; remorse overcame him, and he resolved to bury the past forever, so far as hatred and revenge were concerned, as soon as he could make what amends lay in his power.

Judge Slavens completed his reading, but long before the end came, every man and woman present was longing to catch Riata Rob's hand and enthusiastically declare that never—no, never!—had they doubted his perfect truth and honor and complete rectitude from first to last!

And after Widow Kate brought in Pepita Ramon to describe the peculiarly-shaped scar which marked the bosom of her husband, and after Riata Rob had blushing bared his manly breast to the eager eyes of all there congregated—

"I'll give ye wan hug, Robbie, dear, av all the range laughs at me until they show the back-teeth av 'em—so I will, now!"

The black clouds had all melted away, and with every ugly doubt cleared up, happiness came to stay, so far as our more prominent characters are concerned.

Riata Rob and Jason Runnover were received back into perfect good fellowship by their neighbors, all of whom were free to apologize for their unjust suspicions, all the more readily, perhaps, because even the men wronged were ready to admit that they had ample cause for so thinking.

Owen Taylor frankly confessed that he had been misled by that remarkable likeness between Riata Rob and Ruperto Ramon. He begged forgiveness for the part he had taken in bringing sore trouble upon the Range Champion, and Riata Rob as frankly granted it.

Felix Parry, when he learned the whole truth, was sorely ashamed of his recent conduct, and also begged Riata Rob to forget and forgive.

"Be a brother to me, Felix, and I'll be a true brother to you," was the earnest response.

Their hands met, and in that clasp was cemented a friendship that nothing short of death could break.

Of all who rejoiced over the clearing of Riata Rob's name, Billy Black was the wildest. And before the sun went down, he drank himself blind. And never a toast would he drink to but the long life and good of "the young boss."

Taken all in all, probably Gunter Klam was the one least pleased, by the way matters had panned out. He wandered about the confines of the Gridiron like some melancholy ghost. For Widow Kate was too wildly excited to think of giving the little detective back his parole, and he felt reluctant to ask it of her.

But he did, finally, after Widow Kate stared into his face with wide-eyed amazement, then bursting into a merry laugh as she said:

"Man, dear, are ye cl'ane mad? Me—a Klam? A woman wid the length o' tongue like that—turn into a clam?"

And then, dejectedly, crestfallen, Gunter Klam mounted his horse and rode away, never again to be seen on that range.

In due course word came to Widow Kate Malin, and the night after its receipt, she rode away from the Gridiron in company with Pepita Ramon, escorted by John Morgan and a few picked cowboys. She saw Pepita safely in care of the escort sent half-way by Ruperto Ramon, and with a kiss and a tear for both mother and babe, Widow Kate turned back to her home once more.

She nursed Owen Taylor back to life, and when the once gambler, but now prospective grazer, whispered his growing hopes into her ear, Widow Kate listened, blushed, sighed—and yielded!

Though not at the same time, two weddings took place on the range that are still referred to with pride by nearly every cowboy for many a long league round about. And it is still a matter of friendly dispute which couple are the happiest: Widow Kate and Owen Taylor, or Sybil and Robert Runnover.

No further word ever came from Ruperto Ramon, so it is but fair to believe that he kept his oath to reform and live a more reputable life, if only for the sake of his wife and child.

And now that the bitter black mystery which for a time enshrouded his life was lifted, Jason Runnover grew young again. And when his first grandson came, the once grim old ranchero might have been a boy himself, he was so perfectly happy, so genially bright and gay and in love with all mankind!

THE END.

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- 22 The Sea Serpent; or, The Boy Robinson Crusoe. By Juan Lewis.
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- 374 Gold-Dust Tom; or, Ben's Double Match. By George H. Morse.
- 376 California Joe's First Trail. By Colonel Thomas Hoyer Monstery.
- 413 Billy Bombshell, the Cliff Climber. By F. S. Winthrop.
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- 1 Deadwood Dick, the Prince of the Road.
- 20 Deadwood Dick's Defiance; or, Double Daggers.
- 28 Deadwood Dick in Disguise; or, Buffalo Ben.
- 35 Deadwood Dick in His Castle.
- 42 Deadwood Dick's Bonanza; or, The Phantom Miner.
- 49 Deadwood Dick in Danger; or, Omaha Oil.
- 57 Deadwood Dick's Eagles; or, The Parole of Flood Bar.
- 65 Deadwood Dick on Deck; or, Calamity Jane, the Heroine.
- 72 Deadwood Dick's Last Act; or, Corduroy Charlie.
- 100 Deadwood Dick in Leadville.
- 104 Deadwood Dick's Device; or, The Double Cross Sign.
- 109 Deadwood Dick as Detective.
- 129 Deadwood Dick's Double; or, The Gorgon's Gulch Ghost.
- 138 Deadwood Dick's Home Base; or, Blonde Bill.
- 149 Deadwood Dick's Big Strike; or, A Game of Gold.
- 156 Deadwood Dick of Deadwood; or, The Picked Party.
- 195 Deadwood Dick's Dream; or, The Rivals of the Road.
- 201 Deadwood Dick's Ward; or, The Black Hill's Jezebel.
- 205 Deadwood Dick's Doom; or, Calamity Jane's Adventure.
- 217 Deadwood Dick's Dead Deal.
- 221 Deadwood Dick's Death-Plant.
- 232 Gold-Dust Dick, A Romance of Roughts and Troughs.
- 268 Deadwood Dick's Divide; or, The Spirit of Swamp Lake.
- 268 Deadwood Dick's Death Trail.
- 309 Deadwood Dick's Deal; or, The Gold Brick of Oregon.
- 321 Deadwood Dick's Duets; or, The Fakir of Phantom Flats.
- 347 Deadwood Dick's Duets; or, Days in the Diggings.
- 351 Deadwood Dick Sentenced; or, The Terrible Vendetta.
- 362 Deadwood Dick's Chalm.
- 405 Deadwood Dick in Dead City.
- 410 Deadwood Dick's Diamonds.
- 421 Deadwood Dick in New York; or, A "Cute Case."
- 430 Deadwood Dick's Dust; or, The Chained Hand.
- 443 Deadwood Dick, Jr.; or, The Crimson Crescent Sign.
- 448 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Defiance.
- 453 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Full Hand.
- 459 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Big Round-Up.
- 465 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Racket at Claim 10.
- 471 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Corral; or, Bozeman Bill.
- 476 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dog Detective.
- 481 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Deadwood.
- 491 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Compact.
- 496 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Inheritance.
- 500 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Diggings.
- 508 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Deliverance.
- 515 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Protegee.
- 522 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Three.
- 529 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Danger Ducks.
- 534 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Death Hunt.
- 539 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Texas.
- 544 Deadwood Dick, Jr. the Wild West Vidocq.
- 549 Deadwood Dick, Jr. on His Mettle.
- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Gotham.
- 561 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Boston.
- 567 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Philadelphia.
- 572 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Chicago.
- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr. Aloft.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Decree.
- 595 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Beelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Leadville Lay.
- 612 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Detroit.
- 618 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Cincinnati.
- 624 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Nevada.
- 630 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in No Man's Land.
- 636 Deadwood Dick, Jr. After the Queer.
- 642 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Buffalo.
- 648 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Chase Across the Continent.
- 654 Deadwood Dick, Jr. Among the Smugglers.
- 660 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Insurance Case.
- 666 Deadwood Dick, Jr. Back in the Mines.
- 672 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Durango; or, "Gathered In."
- 678 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Discovery; or, Found a Fortune.
- 684 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dazzle.
- 690 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dollars.
- 695 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Danger Divide.
- 700 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Drop.
- 704 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Jack-Pot.
- 710 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in San Francisco.
- 716 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Still Hunt.
- 722 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dominoes.
- 728 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Disguise.
- 734 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Double Deal.
- 740 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Deathwatch.
- 747 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Doublet.
- 752 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Deathblow.
- 758 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Desperate Strife.
- 764 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Lone Hand.
- 770 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Defeat.
- 776 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Resurrection.
- 782 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dark Days.
- 787 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Defted.
- 792 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Double Device.
- 797 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Desperate Venture.
- 802 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Diamond Dice.
- 807 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Royal Flush.
- 812 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Head-off.
- 816 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Rival.
- 822 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Boom.
- 828 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Scoop.
- 834 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Proxy.
- 840 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Clutch.
- 845 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s High Horse.
- 852 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Devil's Gulch.
- 858 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Death-Hole Hustle.
- 863 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Bombshell.
- 870 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Mexico.
- 876 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Deceitful Duck.
- 882 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Silver Pocket.
- 891 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dead-Sure Game.
- 898 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Double Drive.
- 904 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Trade-Mark.
- 910 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Tip-Top.
- 916 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Double-Decker.

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- 1589 Tom-Cat and Pard; or, The Dead Set at Silver City.
- 622 Tom-Cat's Triad; or, The Affair at Tombstone.
- 631 Tom-Cat's Terrible Task; or, The Cowboy Detective.
- 638 Tom-Cat's Triumph; or, Black Dan's Great Combine.
- 646 Captain Cactus, the Chaparral Cook; or, Josh's Ten Strike.
- 578 The Dandy of Dodge; or, Rustling for Millions.
- 576 The Silver Sport; or, Josh Peppermint's Jubilee.
- 588 Saffron Sol, the Man With a Shadow.
- 601 Happy Hans, the Dutch Vidocq; or, Hot Times at Round-Up.
- 611 Blind Barnacle, the Detective Hercules.
- 646 Cowboy Gid, the Cattle-Range Detective.
- 657 Warbling William, the Mountain Mountebank.
- 665 Jolly Jeremiah, the Plains Detective.
- 676 Signal Sam, the Lookout Scout.
- 689 Billy, the Gypsy Spy; or, The Mystery of Two Lives.
- 699 Simple Sim, the Broncho Buster; or, For Big Stakes.
- 712 The Mesmerist Sport; or, The Mystified Detective.
- 733 Totee Tom, the Mad Prospector.
- 745 Kansas Jim, the Cross-Cut Detective.
- 761 Marmaduke, the Mustang Detective.
- 773 The Rustler of Rolling Stone.
- 785 Lone Hand Joe, the Committee of One.
- 801 Kent Kirby, the High-Kicker from Killbuck.
- 832 The Doctor Detective in Texas.
- 872 Two Showmen Detectives in Colorado.

Other Novels by E. L. Wheeler.

- 80 Rosebud Rob; or, Nugget Ned, the Knight.
- 84 Rosebud Rob on Hand; or, Idyl, the Girl Miner.
- 88 Rosebud Rob's Reappearance; or, Photograph Phil.
- 121 Rosebud Rob's Challenge; or, Cinnamon Chip.
- 277 Denver Doll, the Detective Queen; or, The Yankee's Surround.
- 281 Denver Doll's Victory; or, Skull and Crossbones.
- 285 Denver Doll's Deceit; or, Little Bill's Bonanza.
- 296 Denver Doll's Drift; or, The Road Queen.
- 368 Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer; or, The Life Lottery.
- 379 Yreka Jim's Prize; or, The Wolves of Wake-Up.
- 385 Yreka Jim's Joker; or, The Rivals of Red Nose.
- 389 Yreka Jim's New Role; or, Bicycle Ben.
- 394 Yreka Jim of Yuba Dam.
- 209 Fritz, the Bound-Boy Detective; or, Dot Leetle Game.
- 218 Fritz to the Front; or, The Ventriloquist Hunter.
- 244 Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret; or, A Sister's Devotion.
- 248 Sierra Sam's Secret; or, The Bloody Footprints.
- 253 Sierra Sam's Pard; or, The Angel of Big Vista.
- 258 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
- 334 Kangaroo Kid; or, The Mysterious Miner.
- 339 Kangaroo Kid's Racket; or, The Pride of Played-Out.
- 39 Death-Face, Detective; or, Life in New York.
- 69 The Boy Detective; or, Gold Rifle, the Sharpshooter.
- 96 Watch-Eye, the Detective; or, Arabs and Angels.
- 117 Gilt-Edged Dick, the Sport Detective.
- 145 Captain Ferret, the New York Detective.
- 161 New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective.
- 226 The Arab Detective; or, Snoozer, the Boy Sharp.
- 291 Turk the Boy Ferret.
- 325 Kelley, Hickey & Co., the Detectives of Philadelphia.
- 343 Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Detective.
- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Base Ball Detective.
- 426 Sam Slabides, the Beggar-Boy Detective.
- 434 Jim Beak and Pal, Private Detectives.
- 26 Cloven Hoof, the Buffalo Demon; or, The Border Vultures.
- 32 Bob Woolf; or, The Girl Dead-Shot.
- 45 Old Avalanche; or, Wild Edna, the Girl Brigand.
- 53 Jim Bludsoe, Jr., the Boy Phenix.
- 61 Buckhorn Bill; or, The Red Rifle Team.
- 92 Canada Chet; or, Old Anaconda in Sitting Bull's Camp.
- 118 Jack Hoyle, the Young Speculator.
- 125 Bonanza Bill, Miner; or, Madam Mystery, the Forger.
- 133 Boss Bob, the King of Bootblacks.
- 141 Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent; or, The Branded Brow.
- 177 Nobby Nick of Nevada; or, The Sierras Scampa.
- 181 Wild Frank, the Buckskin Bravo; or, Lady Lily's Love.
- 236 Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado; or, Rowdy Kate.
- 240 Cyclone Kit, the Young Gladiator; or, The Locked Valley.
- 273 Jumbo Joe, the Boy Patrol; or, The Rival Heirs.
- 299 A No. 1, the Dashing Toll-Taker.
- 308 Liza Jane, the Girl Miner; or, The Iron-Nerved Sport.
- 330 Little Quack-Shot; or, The Dead Face of Daggarville.
- 358 First-Class Fred, the Gent from Gopher.
- 378 Nabob Ned; or, The Secret of Slab City.
- 382 Cool Kit, the King of Kids; or, A Villain's Vengeance.
- 438 Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher; or, A Son's Vengeance.
- 446 Senkskin Sam, the Sparkler; or, The Tribunal of Ten.
- 918 Kit Keith, the Revenue Spotter.

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- 490 Broadway Billy, the Bootblack Bravo.
- 514 Broadway Billy's Boogie; or, Clearing a Strange Case.
- 536 Broadway Billy's "Dimkity."
- 557 Broadway Billy's Death Racket.
- 579 Broadway Billy's Surprise Party.
- 605 Broadway Billy; or, The Boy Detective's Big Inning.
- 628 Broadway Billy's Dead Act; or, The League of Seven.
- 669 Broadway Billy Abroad; or, The Bootblack in Frisco.
- 675 Broadway Billy's Best; or, Beating San Francisco's Finest.
- 687 Broadway Billy in Clover.
- 696 Broadway Billy in Texas; or, The River Rustlers.
- 703 Broadway Billy's Brand.
- 711 Broadway Billy at Santa Fe; or, The Clever Deal.
- 720 Broadway Billy's Full Hand; or, The Gamble Detective.
- 735 Broadway Billy's Business.
- 738 Broadway Billy's Curious Case.
- 753 Broadway Billy in Denver.
- 762 Broadway Billy's Bargain; or, The Three Detective.
- 769 Broadway Billy, the Retriever Detective.
- 775 Broadway Billy's Shadow Chase.
- 783 Broadway Billy's Beagles; or, The Trio's Quest.
- 786 Broadway Billy's Team; or, The Combine's Big Pull.
- 790 Broadway Billy's Brigade; or, The Dead Alive.
- 796 Broadway Billy's Queer Request.
- 800 Broadway Billy Baffled.
- 805 Broadway Billy's Signal Scoop.
- 810 Broadway Billy's Wipe Out.
- 815 Broadway Billy's Bank Racket.
- 821 Broadway Billy's Bluff.
- 826 Broadway Billy Among Jersey Thugs.
- 833 Broadway Billy's Raid.
- 839 Broadway Billy's Big Boom.
- 844 Broadway Billy's Big Bulge.
- 849 Broadway Billy's \$100,000 Snap.
- 856 Broadway Billy's Blind; or, The Bootblack Stowaway.
- 862 Broadway Billy in London.
- 868 Broadway Billy's Shadows London Slums.
- 874 Broadway Billy's French Game.
- 880 Broadway Billy and the Bomb-Throwers.
- 918 The Trump Dock-Boy.
- 912 Train Boy Triet's Hot Hustle.
- 906 Safety Sam, the Cycle Sport.
- 900 Jumping Jack's Jubilee.
- 887 Battery Bob, the Dock Detective.
- 860 Silver-Mask, the Man of Mystery; or, The Golden Keys.
- 869 Shasta, the Gold King; or, For Seven Years Dead.
- 420 The Detective's Apprentice; or, A Boy Without a Name.
- 424 Cluba John; or, Red-Hot Times at Ante Bar.
- 439 Sandy Sam, the Street Scout.
- 467 Disco Dan, the Daisy Dude.
- 506 Redlight Ralph, the Prince of the Road.
- 524 The Engineer Detective; or, Redlight Ralph's Resolve.
- 548 Mar, the Night Express Detective.
- 571 Air-Line Luke, the Young Engineer; or, The Double Case.
- 592 The Boy Pinkerton; or, Running the Rascals Out.
- 615 Fighting Harry, the Chief of Chained Cyclone.
- 640 Bareback Beth, the Centaur of the Circle.
- 647 Typewriter Tilly, the Merchant's Ward.
- 659 Moonlight Morgan, the "Pizenest" Man of Ante Bar.
- 894 Arizona Dick's Wipe-Out.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER.

- 190 Dandy Darke; or, The Tigers of High Pine.
- 210 Faro Frank; or, Dandy Darke's Go-Down Pard.
- 818 The Hustler Rogue-Catcher.
- 838 Poker Pete's Double Dodge.
- 851 The Tie-To Sport; or, High Hustling at Sinners' Flat.
- 888 Monte Saul, the Sport.
- 901 Diamond Dave, the Gilt-Edge Shooter.
- 919 Crack-Shot Daisy's Drop.

BY HAROLD PAYNE.

- 843 Dan, the River Sport; or, Follies the Frisco Sharp.
- 892 Bowery Ben in Chinatown.
- 911 Bowery Bob, the East-side Detective.

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- 8 Kansas King; or, The Red Right Hand.
- 19 The Phantom Spy; or, The Pilot of the Prairie.
- 55 Deadly-Eye, the Unknown Scout; or, The Banded Brotherhood.
- 68 Border Robin Hood; or, The Prairie Rover.
- 158 Fancy Frank of Colorado; or, The Trapper's Trust.

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- 914 New York Nat's Three of a Kind.
- 908 New York Nat's Double.
- 902 New York Nat's in Colorado.
- 896 New York Nat in Gold Nugget Camp.
- 889 New York Nat's Deadly Deal.
- 883 New York Nat's Crook-Chase.
- 877 New York Nat's Trump Card.
- 871 New York Nat and the Grave Ghouls.
- 865 New York Nat's Masked Mascot.
- 859 New York Nat, the Gamble Detective.
- 853 Dick Doom's Kidnapper Knock-Out.
- 847 Dick Doom's Ten Strike.
- 842 Dick Doom's Flush Hand.
- 772 Dick Doom's Death-Grip; or, The Detective by Destiny.
- 777 Dick Doom's Destiny; or, The River Blackleg's Terror.
- 784 Dick Doom; or, The Sharps and Sharks of New York.
- 788 Dick Doom in Boston; or, A Man of Many Masks.
- 798 Dick Doom in Chicago.
- 798 Dick Doom in the Wild West.
- 808 Dick Doom's Clean Sweep; or, Five Links in a Clue.
- 808 Dick Doom's Death Clue.
- 818 Dick Doom's Diamond Deal.
- 819 Dick Doom's Girl Mascot.
- 829 Dick Doom's Shadow Hunt.
- 835 Dick Doom's Big Haul.
- 749 Dashing Charlie; or, The Kentucky Tenderfoot's First Trail.
- 756 Dashing Charlie's Festivity; or, The Renegade's Captive.
- 760 Dashing Charlie's Pawnee Pard.
- 766 Dashing Charlie, the Rescuer.
- 497 Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys.
- 737 Buck Taylor, the Comanche's Captive.
- 743 Buck Taylor's Boys; or, The Red Riders of the Rio Grande.
- 560 Pawnee Bill, the Prairie Shadower.
- 713 Pawnee Bill; or, Carl, the Mad Cowboy.
- 719 Pawnee Bill's Pledge; or, The Cowboy's Doom.
- 725 Pawnee Bill; or, Daring Dick.
- 692 Redfern's Curious Case; or, The Rival Sharps.
- 691 Redfern at Devil's Ranch; or, The Sharp from Texas.
- 702 Redfern's High Hand; or, Blue Jacket.
- 707 Redfern's Last Trail; or, The Red Sombre Rangers.
- 678 Red Ralph's Ruse; or, The Buccaneer Mischiefman.
- 684 Red Ralph's Bold Game; or, The Wizard Sallor.
- 679 Red Ralph, the Shadower; or, The Freebooter's Legacy.
- 644 Butterfly Billy's Disguise.
- 650 Butterfly Billy, the Pony Express Rider.
- 656 Butterfly Billy's Man Hunt.
- 662 Butterfly Billy's Bonanza.
- 565 Kent Kingdon; or, The Owls of the Overland.
- 570 Kent Kingdon's Shadower; or, the Card Queen.
- 575 Kent Kingdon's Duel; or, The Surgeon Scout.
- 586 Kent Kingdon's Doom; or, The Buckskin Avenger.
- 545 Little Run Down; or, The Buccaneers of Barrataria.
- 540 Little's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
- 555 Little's Confession; or, The Creole Corsair.
- And Fifty Others.

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- 397 Bob o' the Bowery; or, The Prince of Mulberry Street.
- 415 The Vagabond Detective; or, Bowery Bob's Boom.
- 452 Hotspur Bob, the Street-Boy Detective.
- 460 The Lawyer's Shadow; or, Luke's Legacy.
- 472 Jaunty Joe, the Young Horse-King.
- 494 Sully Slim, the Young Ferryman Detective.
- 504 Five Points Phil, the Pavement Prince.
- 509 Jack Jagger, the Butcher Boy Detective.
- 516 Tartar Tim; or, Five Points Phil's Menagerie.
- 526 North River Nat, the Pier Detective.
- 533 Wrestling Rex, the Pride of the Sixth Ward.
- 541 Jeff Flicker, the Stable Boy Detective.
- 551 Nick Nettle, the Boy Shadow; or, The Old Well Mystery.
- 559 Harlem Jack, the Office Boy Detective.
- 569 Brooklyn Ben, the On-His-Own-Hook Detective.
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- 588 Jack-o'-Lantern, the Under-Sea Prospector.
- 603 Wide-Awake Bert, the Street-Steerer.
- 614 Whistling Jacob, the Detective's Aid.
- 625 Buck Bumblebee, the Harlem Hummer.
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- 706 Tom Thistle, the Road-House Detective.
- 717 Mosquito Jack, the Hustler Gamble.
- 726 Dennis Duff, the Brown Sport's Kid.
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- 765 Flipper Flynn, the Street Patrol.
- 771 Foxy Fred's Odd Pard; or, The Keener's Huge Hustle.
- 781 Cast-Off Cale, the Scapgoat Detective.
- 824 Bowery Billy, the Bunco Bouncer.
- 837 The Big Four of the Bowery.
- 846 Buck, the New York Sharper.
- 850 The Grand Street Arab.
- 855 The West Broadway Gamble.
- 860 The Boat-Club Mascot; or, Dan Decker's Double Deal.
- 864 The Union Square Baggage Boy.
- 878 The Street Arab's Blind.
- 886 The Five Points Lodging House Janitor.
- 890 Ace High, the Trump Card Detective.
- 895 Fifth Avenue Fred, the Valet Detective.
- 899 Basement Bert, the Boy Cobbler Detective.
- 903 Billy Blue-Blazes, the Dodger of the Docks.
- 907 Reddy Rusher, Bell-Boy 4-11-44.
- 915 Flip Flasher, Ferret, of East Broadway.

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- 922 Sol Sharpe, Detective; or, Hayseed Ramsey's Double Find. By Edward L. Wheeler.
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816 Buffalo Bill's Red Trail.
812 Buffalo Bill's Death-Knell.
794 Buffalo Bill's Winning Hand.
787 Buffalo Bill's Dead Shot.
781 Buffalo Bill's Brand.
777 Buffalo Bill's Spy Shadower.
769 Buffalo Bill's Sweepstake.
765 Buffalo Bill's Dozen; or, Silk Ribbon Sam.
761 Buffalo Bill's Mascot.
757 Buffalo Bill's Double.
750 Buffalo Bill's Big Four.
743 Buffalo Bill's Flush Hand.
739 Buffalo Bill's Blind; or, The Masked Driver.
735 Buffalo Bill and His Merry Men.
731 Buffalo Bill's Beagles; or, Silk Lasso Sam.
727 Buffalo Bill's Body Guard.
722 Buffalo Bill on the War-path.
716 Buffalo Bill's Scout Shadowers.
710 Buffalo Bill Baffled; or, The Deserter Desperado.
697 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Brotherhood.
691 Buffalo Bill's Blind Trail; or, Mustang Madge.
667 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.
649 Buffalo Bill's Chief of Cowboys; or, Buck Taylor.
644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza; or, Silver Circle Knights.
362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
329 Buffalo Bill's Pledge; or, The League of Three.
189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.

By Buffalo Bill.

- 839 The Ranch King Dead-Shot; or, Texas Jack's Proxy.
820 White Beaver's Still Hunt.
807 Wild Bill, the Wild West Duelist.
800 Wild Bill, the Dead-Center Shot.
639 Buffalo Bill's Gold King.
599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pard of the Plains.
414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
53 Death-Trail, the Chief of Scouts.

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629 Buffalo Bill's Daring Role; or, Daredeath Dick.
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153 Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard; or, Dashing Dandy.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

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795 Old Night-Hawk, the Crook Shadower.
763 The Prince of New York Crooks.
756 Old Burke, the Madison Square Detective.
747 Double-voice Dan's Double Disguise.
715 Double-Voice Dan on Deck.
702 Double-Voice Dan, the Always-on-Deck Detective.
696 Double-Voice Dan, the Go-it Alone Detective.
689 The Sparkler Sharp.
676 Hurricane Hal, the Cowboy Hotspur.
669 Old True Blue, the Trusty.
663 The Giant Sport; or, Sold to Satan.
656 Old Ping Ugly, the Rough and Ready.
648 Gold Glove Kid, the Man of Grit.
641 Aztec Jack, the Desert Nomad.
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602 Captain Nameless, the Mountain Mystery.
571 Old Dismal, the Range Detective.
545 Hustler Harry, the Cowboy Sport.

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841 Graydon's Double Deal.
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808 The Crook-Detective's Pull.
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764 The New York Sharp's Shadower.
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815 The Soft Hand's Clutch.
809 Dan Dunn, the Soft-Hand Sport.
796 The Frisco Detective's Thug-Tangle.
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720 The Secret Six; or, Old Halcyon.
712 The Man of Silk.
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458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.
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438 Oklahoma Nick.
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379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
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367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
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355 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.
351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
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324 Old Forked Lightning, the Solitary.
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